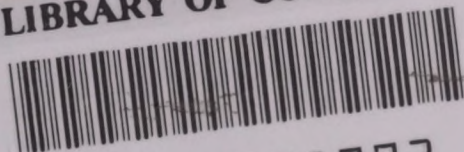


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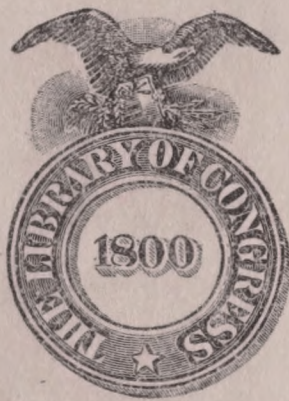
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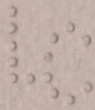
THE SAMOVAR GIRL

BY

FREDERICK MOORE

AUTHOR OF

"SAILOR GIRL," "SIBERIA TO-DAY," "THE DEVIL'S ADMIRAL,"
"ISLE O' DREAMS," ETC.



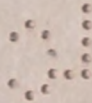
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TO
ROBERT H. DAVIS

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PROLOGUE

THE VALLEY OF DESPAIR

Clank! Clank! Clank!

It was the music of chains. A column of unfortunates from the big prison on the hill swung down the road and turned into the wide street between the log houses. They were on their way out into the *taiga* to cut wood and hew timbers under a guard of Cossacks. The chains hanging from the wrists of the convicts to their ankles, crossed in front of them but hidden under the *khalats* — long gray capes worn by exiles — made the doleful music as the long line of marchers, gray as the cold fog of the morning, moved up the Czar's road and was lost in the frozen mists that masked the edge of the wilderness.

The sun was up, but it was only a patch of weak yellow light against the dull sky which roofed the Valley of Despair. Lowering wisps of fog still shrouded the hills about the exile settlement — fog that had lifted from the frozen and desolate reaches of the Ingoda, from the smoking huts of the tiny plain, from the snow-streaked slopes on which squatted like a hideous monster the great low, rambling prison of yellow-painted logs.

The morning was bitter cold. The streets were almost deserted. The windows of the log buildings still glowed with the dim yellow light of guttering candles behind the frost-bound panes. White smoke from the chimneys of the houses and huts rose straight up into the air, for

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there was not even the ghost of a breeze. And the cold still air carried sounds with startling clearness — the tolling of a bell at lazy intervals, the barking of a dog, the distant cry of a wolf, and now the ringing clatter of axes being driven into frost-laden wood by the invisible exiles.

Shadows appeared at the windows frequently. For the Czar's mail was due this morning from Irkutsk, and the house-huddled people were waiting for the first tinkle of the sledge-bells. The mail! The mail from Moscow, from Petersburg, from Tambov, from the Valley of the Beloved Volga, so many heartbreaking versts away! The mail would bring life and death, joy and sorrow, sentence and pardon to Chita, in the Valley of Despair. The mail would bring the Czar's word, the heaven-sent mercy, or the curt condemnation. The mail, by the relays of sledges, was the reach of the scepter from the throne of majesty to the Valley of Despair in Siberia.

None listened more eagerly for the first jingle of the mail-sledges that morning than Peter, son of Peter, in the tiny hut of Gorekin the bootmaker, an exile but by the gracious compassion of the governor a member of the "free gang." Peter, son of Peter, was only ten years old. He worked with his father in the boxlike hut on the Sofistkaya, helping to make boots for the officers of the Czar and the Cossacks.

Peter's blue eyes were set deeply in his head, for he had never had enough to eat — not even enough sticky black bread, or enough *eëkra* which is the raw, red eggs of the big salmon. Peter was a tall boy for his age, but not very sturdy. His yellow hair was clipped close to his scalp, and his little round head was bent low while his hammer *tap-tapped* at the wooden pegs in the boot soles by the candlelight.

Peter's father was a political. He had been sent to Siberia for thinking — thinking about government, and

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inducing others to think. Which was foolish, for the Czar and his ministers settled all affairs of government for the good of the people. Yet God was good, for Peter's father had been admitted to the free gang because he could make boots, and so did not have to stay in the big prison on the hill. And Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff, Excellence, and Czar's Governor, allowed Peter and his father to have a tiny hut to themselves — a place of one room, one window, a fire-pit with a stone chimney, and shelves against the log wall on which to sleep. They even had a battered brass samovar in which to boil water for their tea.

Peter's father was not old, though his back was bent by years in chains before Peter was born, and then by more years of stooping over a stitching-frame sewing boots. "Gorekin the old bootmaker," everybody called him, partly because his face was covered with a long and heavy beard, and partly because his eyes had such an old look in them — eyes which looked past everybody far into the future and seemed to be waiting for some strange vision to appear.

Peter was proud of his father, and loved him beyond expression. For his father knew everything — even knew how many versts it was to Moscow, information which many people gave money to know, and knowing, kept the secret for themselves. There are many things in an exile colony which it is forbidden to know, so whisper talk is bought and sold, some dealing in secrets of a certain kind, and some selling coming news about revolutions.

Peter's little round head was always being puzzled, and his blue eyes were always full of questions. He loved the Czar, just as everybody else loved the Czar — only when there were no soldiers listening, or no secret police of the Third Division, men would swear bitter oaths in whispers against majesty. It was not easy to tell who might be

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secret police, for your friend to-day, talking against the government of the Czar, might to-morrow prove to be one of the Third Division, and then doors of the big prison on the hill would open for you, and dawn would meet you with an execution squad.

Peter could not remember his mother. She had followed his father into exile, and Peter had been born in The Street of the Dames. His mother had died that day. Peter's father said now it was just as well, for life was really death in the Valley of Despair. And though Peter was only ten, he already knew something of the bitterness of life. Had he not seen a man with a back all raw from whipping, who had escaped from the prison? Yes, he had come crawling to the bootmaker's hut, too weak to go on into the wilderness with the others who had escaped, and could only lie all night close to the fire-pit, waiting for the soldiers to come in the morning and take him away.

But there were pleasant things in life for Peter. There were the ladies who came from The Street of the Dames. They spoke Czar's Russian and were grand ladies. They came to have boots mended, but they stayed long and whispered much with Peter's father, winking and nodding their heads about nothing at all. Sometimes they brought little cakes with spices in them, or a handful of dry tea, or a bit of sugar from China, or sweetened ginger-root. And sometimes they gave Peter as much as a ruble. Their husbands were up in the big prison on the hill, and the grand ladies had followed to the Valley of Despair and had built for themselves with their own hands a whole street of log houses.

And for some reason which Peter could never fathom, after these ladies from The Street of the Dames came to have their shoes mended, Peter's father always remembered that he had to go up to the prison with a pair of new

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boots for an officer, or to measure feet for a new pair, or to get some leather — always an errand. And the ladies would wait till he returned, when they cried quietly into their handkerchiefs, and after much whispering went away to their log houses.

But the greatest puzzle of all to Peter was that his father had been exiled for reading books, yet his father now read the Bible, which was a book, and told all about God and the Czar. But, of course, the Bible was always hidden behind the pile of wood close to the fire-pit.

And Peter's father read the almanacs which came every year from Moscow, and everybody knows an almanac is nothing more nor less than a book. Everybody had a new almanac every year, and wonderful books they were too, for they told about the sun, moon, and stars, the holy days of Holy Russia, the goodness and greatness of the Czar, the names and name days of grand dukes and grand duchesses and all the wonderful things they had done for the poor people, and had pictures of saints, and depictions of miracles, pictures of watches which might be purchased in Moscow or Petrograd by people who were rich, and pictures of skeletons of dead men! Oh, the almanacs were wonderful!

Peter had worn his last year's one out from much reading of it by the fire of nights with his father. And now the new one from Moscow was two months late. That was why Peter watched so anxiously every morning for the mail-sledges from Irkutsk, which was on the Petersburg side of Lake Baikal.

So this morning he was pegging away fast with his hammer, his father working near by and whispering to himself, a way he had when busy. The candle was still guttering between them, the fire in the pit was smoking comfortably, and the old brass samovar was singing merrily on a shelf.

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Peter leaned over from his bench every few minutes, to blow a hole in the frost on the windowpane, and look up the Sofistkaya in the direction of the post-house. But he could not see far yet, from the fog, though he did see the column of unfortunates going out into the wilderness with the Cossack soldiers.

Peter rather feared the Cossacks. They were "free men"—big swaggering fellows with blue breeches and yellow stripes on their tunics and some of them with colored tops in their tall *shlapkas*—round caps of fuzzy wool. And though Peter feared the Cossacks, he was also proud of them, for they were a part of Holy Russia and the power of the Czar flashed from the points of their lances as they galloped over the plains. And the Czar was Ataman of all the Cossacks, just as he was Emperor of all Russians. And there were more Russians in the world than all other peoples put together, counting the barbarians of far lands across the seas.

Peter longed for the day when he would be big enough to become a soldier of majesty, and wear on his cap the little oval button—"The Eye of the Czar." Then he would know all things. His father always smiled sadly at such ideas.

"Peter Petrovitch Gorekin, a soldier of the Czar!" Peter's father would say. "A soldier against the people, a soldier to bind our chains the tighter! Oh, Peter Petrovitch! The day will come when your eye will see and understand!"

Which was a surprising thing for Peter's father to say, for Peter could see well enough with his eyes, except when the smoke from the fire-pit blew down the stone chimney and got into his eyes while he was reading from the almanac and learning new words.

Peter's father was most anxious for Peter to learn to read as well as the priest—yes, even as well as Michael

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Alexandrovitsh Kirsakoff, the Colonel Governor. Peter could have made many kopecks in the evenings, helping to skin sheep for the butcher, but Peter's father insisted upon lessons with the almanac by the fire.

"The labor of a man's hands can be forced to do the will of a master," his father would say gravely, "but the labor of a man's head is his own, and no man can control it."

Peter could not understand that, because it was impossible to drive pegs with one's head — it could only be done with hands and the hammer. And his father worked with his hands, too, and never did a thing with his head, or so Peter supposed.

It was not long after the column of unfortunates and Cossacks had disappeared into the *taiga* that Peter saw two black spots rise on the little hill across the Ingoda River, and drop again out of sight.

"Ee-yah!" cried Peter joyfully. "The mail comes!"

His father lifted his head and looked up from his stitching-frame to listen.

"I hear nothing but the music of the samovar," he said.

"They have crossed the bend to the river," insisted Peter. "I heard the bells and I saw the sledges! The horses are coming fast!"

Both sat still and listened, with only the snapping of the fire and the song of the samovar in their ears. Though they waited in silence, the sound of the bells did not come to them down the chimney.

"Watch the road," said his father, and returned to his stitching. Peter put his eye to the hole in the frost and watched the street up beyond the post-house. But he saw only an occasional Buriat, or a Cossack striding along, with now and then a Tartar hunter coming in from the hills with raw fur thrown over his shoulders, and

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soldiers hurrying down from the prison above the settlement.

Then, the bells! The first faint jingle came to Peter's ears, and at the same time he saw the galloping horses of the leading sledge come up into the road from the river hollow, running free for the post-house.

"Now!" cried Peter. "The post is here! With the new almanacs! Please! Give me the kopecks! And may I run to see if the new almanac has come for sure?"

Peter's father stopped work and filled his glass from the samovar, threw on the fire a fresh chunk of wood and dug some kopecks from his pocket.

"Go, little son, but dress warmly — it is too cold outside for a Tartar."

Peter shoved his rag-bound feet into pink felt boots, whirled his long muffler about his neck and got into his gray coat. Pulling his cap over his head and ears, he took the kopecks from his father and flew out through the door in a cloud of white steam made by the warm air from inside the hut as it escaped into the frigid atmosphere outside.

Already the sledges had arrived in front of the post-house. The street was filled with people and there was a great to-do and gabbling. Peter could see the Cossack guards who had come with the sledges dismounting from their horses. The half-frozen drivers of the sledges were rolling stiffly out of their blankets, to clump through the icicle-fringed door of the post-house for their hot bowls of *bortsh* and their drams of vodka.

Peter ran up to the crowd surrounding the sledges and breathlessly pushed in between the legs of the soldiers and onlookers. Surely, he thought, this month the almanacs must have come! Twice before he had been disappointed by the monthly mail and now he was shaking

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with eagerness. He wanted to cry out at once to those about the sledges, "Has the new almanac come?"

But there were no mail sacks on the first sledge. Instead it had five travelers — an old woman, an officer who was an aide of the Colonel Governor, two fur-buyers, and a little girl — a pretty little girl, who was about the same age as Peter. She had pulled back her beautiful cap of ermine, and Peter could see the pink of her cheeks, her laughing blue eyes and the scarlet silk lining of her coat of sables where she had turned the collar away from her chin. She was standing up in the sledge and looking over the heads of the crowd and chattering with her old nurse in delight at having arrived back at her home.

Peter stared at the little girl. He knew who she was — Katerin Stephanovna Kirsakoff, daughter of the Colonel Governor. Peter had seen her many times driving through the settlement with her Cossack outriders guarding her. He knew she was kind to the poor people and to the unfortunates. On Butter Weeks she always threw silver kopecks from her carriage to the crowds at the fair. It was said that she knew even the Czar himself.

Peter thought Katerin was as beautiful as a picture in a holy icon. He almost forgot about his beloved almanacs as he stood and gazed at the beauty of Katerin. Her furs were so rich and gorgeous, her skin was so clear and rosy, her eyes were so sparkling bright. She had plenty of good things to eat, he was sure — and the cold did not hurt her, the guards of Cossacks protected her from the gaunt tigers in the hills, the officers bowed to her, the soldiers worshiped her, and she lived in the great and grand house of her father, the Colonel Governor, Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff.

"The Governor comes!" rose the warning cry from those on the outer fringes of the throng about the sledges. The soldiers at once began to drive the people back from

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the sledge in which Katerin was standing to clear the way for the droshky of the Colonel Governor.

Peter was inside the ring of people about the sledge. He was pushed away roughly. His heart sank, for he felt that he was to be cheated out of the news for which he had run to the post-house — news about the almanacs. He could restrain his eagerness no longer, and fearing that he would be left in doubt about the almanacs if the soldiers hustled him up the street with the other people, he ran from a soldier in toward the sledge, and making an obeisance to Excellence, raised his arms and cried out to Katerin, "Did your Excellence bring the almanacs of the new year?"

But Katerin did not hear him. She was standing up and clapping her hands as she saw her father's droshky come whirling down the street toward her.

The officer in the sledge got out of the robes wound round him, and to the ground. He commanded the soldiers to drive the people away farther so the Colonel Governor might not be delayed in getting to his daughter.

Peter turned to run from this officer, but slipped and fell. And before he could regain his footing on the hard and slippery snow, the officer came hurrying from the sledge and tripped and fell over the boy — fell flat in the road before the post-house.

"Fool!" cried the officer, glaring at Peter. "Get away with you! You dare address Excellence, and now you are in my road!"

Peter stood up. The officer struck the boy in the face, and Peter fell again, almost stunned by the blow. He saw the officer's boots stride away and recognized them as boots which he and his father had made. There was a forest of boots in all directions, and the sound of voices reached Peter's ears in a confused medley.

Peter was ashamed. The blood was flowing from his

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nose and making a mess on his chin and muffler. The tears which came into his eyes from the pain were freezing on his cheeks and his eyelids were freezing together, making a film through which he could see but dimly.

The crowd had drawn away from the sledge now, leaving Peter lying in the dirty snow. Such a sight to make of himself, he thought, in view of Katerin! And how angry she would be to see that he had gotten in the way of the officer and had made him fall down like a clumsy bear.

Peter heard the voice of his father calling to him.

“Little son! Get up quickly and run! The Governor comes! Do not let the Excellence see you there!”

But Peter could not move quickly for his arms and legs seemed strangely stiff and numb and helpless. His father ran out into the open space just as Governor Kirsakoff got out of his carriage to hasten to his little daughter in the sledge. He was a tall man, ruddy of face, with white teeth showing in a smile under black mustaches. He wore a high cap of sable with a badge of the Czar upon it. His longskirted coat of black was lined with fur which stuck out in fringes at the edges, and he wore a belt with silver doubleheaded eagles at the buckle. A scarlet strap depended from one shoulder and crossed his breast, and he wore a saber at his side — a saber with a gold hilt, bearing upon it the initials of his Emperor.

Governor Kirsakoff held out his arms toward his daughter as he approached the sledge. The officer who struck Peter was beside the Governor, with watchful eyes for the safety of his chief and the little girl.

Peter's father lifted him to his feet, and Peter brushed the icy film from his eyes.

“Get away, you and that boy!” the officer growled as the Governor strode swiftly to the sledge.

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"The boy meant no harm, Excellence," said Peter's father, pulling off his cap and making a deep bow, as he tried to push Peter on before him.

"Who is this here?" demanded the Governor, catching sight of Peter and his father, and seeing that the boy's face was bleeding. Governor Kirsakoff's smile vanished, and he scowled angrily, sensing something in the nature of a calamity in the presence of his daughter.

"Excellence, this boy yelled at Katerin Stephanovna," explained the officer. "And he tripped my feet when I came down from the sledge."

Peter's father swept his cap to the ground in an abject bow.

"Pardon, Excellence — I will take the boy away."

"What now!" exclaimed Kirsakoff, with a close look at the bootmaker. "Is this Gorekin? Is this what I put you into the free gang for? to be under the feet of your Governor?"

Peter's father bowed once more.

"True, Excellence, I am Peter Pavlovitch Gorekin, the bootmaker."

"Then you should be at your boots and not under my feet!" raged Kirsakoff. "Do I give you the liberty of the settlement to have you in the way with a bloody-nosed youngster when my little daughter comes home?" The Governor turned wrathfully to the commander of the Cossack guard about the sledges. "Take this Gorekin away to the prison!" he commanded.

"Excellence, my son!" cried Peter's father, stricken to his soul by the disaster in the Governor's order. "Oh, Excellence, I beg — if I go to the prison, what is to become of my son?"

"You should have prized your liberty and kept your son out of the way," said the Governor. "You think nothing of ruining the happiness of my little daughter!"

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So your son must learn his place.—— Take them both to the prison!”

And Kirsakoff turned away and hurried to the sledge.

“What has happened to the poor people?” asked Katerin, her face troubled as she watched Peter and his father. She saw that the boy had been hurt and was crying, and that the soldiers now menaced them.

“Do not look at them, little daughter,” said Kirsakoff. “They have disobeyed the rules. Was it cold coming from Irkutsk? And did you bring me many kisses?”

The Governor lifted her out of the sledge and smothered her in his arms. At this moment a Cossack interposed himself between the bootmaker and the Governor, and two soldiers closed in on Peter and his father, their bayonets fixed upon their rifles.

Gorekin held up his hand in a plea to speak once more to the Governor. The bootmaker had dropped his cap, his face showed the agony of his despair, and the tears streamed down his face. His mouth was open and his lips trembled with the chagrin and horror of what had befallen him.

“Excellence! I submit!” he pleaded. “But by the mercy of God, condemn not my son to the prison too!”

One of the Cossacks pushed him back violently so that he spun round and staggered blindly in an effort to keep his footing on the slippery snow. Then he turned with a cry and thrust the Cossack aside, to run after the Governor, hands stretched out in supplication.

“Mercy for my son!” he called after Kirsakoff.

A Cossack’s saber flashed, and Gorekin received its point in the back — once, twice — and with a scream, fell writhing on the snow-packed street before the post-house.

Kirsakoff ran with little Katerin in his arms toward the near-by droshky which was awaiting them. The crowd

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closed in at once about the stricken bootmaker and his son.

Little Peter fell to his knees beside his father, who had been rudely rolled upon his back by the Cossack with the saber. This Cossack searched hastily through the pockets of the greatcoat of Gorekin. Peter, screaming in terror, supposed that all this was being done to help his father.

The Cossack found the curved leather-knife of Gorekin in a pocket of the dying man's coat, and flung the knife upon the ground. "He held this knife in his hand!" cried the Cossack. "It is the knife with which he would have killed the Governor!"

Peter could not realize yet the disaster which had come to him and his father. He knew only that the one human being who loved him, and whom he loved above everything in the world, was hurt and bleeding. The slowly reddening snow beside his father gave the boy a vague idea of a wound which might in time be cured.

And it might not be real at all, this tragic morning, but a dream. Peter saw about him the black circle of boots like the trees of a forest; he saw the print of nails in the hard snow; he noted a small round stone close by his father's head — the world appeared to be full of trifling things, yet suddenly all trifles were invested with terror. He prayed even as he screamed, that he might wake to find his father reading from the new almanac beside the fire in their little hut.

"Little father! Little father!" he cried in his agony.

The bootmaker coughed harshly.

"He tried to kill the Governor," said a voice. "There lies the knife — and I ran him through with my saber."

Peter recognized the voice as that of the Cossack who had struck down his father.

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“Little son —” gasped Gorekin, his dimming eyes on Peter, and his hand moving slowly toward the boy.

“Thou whom I love!” cried Peter, “come quickly for the man who has medicine and can cure you! Come to the watch-fixer who has the charms and the herbs!”

“God’s blessing on you — I go — to meet — the — dead!” whispered Gorekin.

“You are not to die!” cried Peter, and flung himself down upon his father and kissed him. Then he sat back on his heels, moaning wildly as he saw his father’s face graying to the color of the trampled snow.

“I shall kill Kirsakoff!” Peter shouted. “I shall kill — the Governor — !”

“Pray!” said his father weakly. “Pray to God for — power and —” but he could say no more, and making an effort to cross himself with both hands he died, staring up into the leaden sky.

“He is dead,” said a voice. “Take the boy to the prison. It is the order of the Governor.”

And Peter, sobbing and kicking out against the soldiers who grasped him and dragged him away, left his father lying in the snow before the post-house.

The soldiers dragged Peter up the Sofistkaya. His eyes clung to the mail bags being carried into the post-house, and though he was crying bitterly, he wondered if the almanacs had come from Moscow after all.

Next he knew he found himself in the sandy snow of the Sofistkaya, passing his own little hut, and saw the white smoke rising from the crude stone chimney. He thought of the samovar inside singing on a shelf, of the warmth and comfort that he would never know again, of his beloved father who somehow, by some terrible fate which had descended upon him out of the skies, was gone forever from the bench and the stitching-frame.

The two soldiers drove Peter on and in time they went

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over the wooden bridge across the frozen Ingoda, and up a hill. The tears on his face and frozen in his lids gave him great pain from cold. But he brushed his eyes clear of the ice particles and looked ahead. Before him were the yellow upright logs of the great prison stockade — and the great gate waiting to receive him into the Gethsemane of the Valley of Despair.

I

TWENTY YEARS AFTER

KATERIN was awake before dawn. She lay still, listening in the dark for sounds of conflict in the city. For months she had been accustomed to the rattle of rifle-fire through day and night, and now she found it hard to realize that the looting and burning had ceased.

The windows of Katerin's room were hung with heavy blankets to conceal the candlelight by night, even though in the winter the glass of the panes was always nearly covered with heavy frost. She had no way of knowing how near it was to dawn, or if the day had come.

Katerin Stephanovna Kirsakoff — that was her full name. And she was hiding in an old log house with her father, who had been retired from the army of the Czar with the rank of general. And her father was Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff, once Governor in the Valley of Despair, as it was known in the exile days before the revolution. And the log house was in Chita, where Kirsakoff had ruled his Cossacks, but Kirsakoff and his daughter were now hiding from the Cossacks.

Katerin rose from her bed, and guided by the dim, shaded flame burning before the icon in the corner of the room, she held out her arms to the image of the Virgin Mother, and whispered, "Save us, Mother of God, again this day, from those who beset us, and bring to us help from our enemies in our time of danger!"

She continued to whisper her prayers while she dressed in the dark. Then she went to one of the windows and

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pulled aside the blanket. She scraped a tiny hole in the frost so that she might look down into the courtyard, to the end of the street and out over the plains which stretched away from the city toward the border of Manchuria, many versts away. In that direction lay safety, but Katerin knew that she could not get out of the city, much less cross those frozen plains.

The subdued light of morning coming in through the white frost on the panes revealed her as a woman of medium height, of figure slender and supple, and clad in a trailing velvet house-dress of wine-red. Thrown over her shoulders, and partly covering the faded velvet of the dress, was a sleeveless coat of sable. She had the oval, high-bred face of the untitled nobility of Russia. The Kirsakoffs were one of the old boyar families who had always served their emperors as officers and administrators in the empire which spanned half the world.

Katerin had inherited all the best qualities of her race and her class. As the daughter of General Kirsakoff she had grown up like an Imperial princess. Educated by tutors from Paris and Petersburg, she had also learned to ride like a Cossack. And as her mother had died when Katerin was a small girl, she had the poise of a woman, who, though still young, had presided over her father's table in the Governor's palace — the Government house. So all her life she had been accustomed to a deference which was akin to that granted to royalty.

Now Katerin and her father were fugitives. The fighting between the various factions in Chita was over; the Cossacks were in control of the city — and controlling the Cossacks was a Mongol chieftain who had set himself up as the ruling prince and ruled with firing squads.

Months of terrorism in the city had made Katerin pale and wan. Her blue eyes were sad and deep set, and she had an expression of melancholy. The pallor of her

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cheeks was accentuated by her black hair, which was drawn down over her ears tightly. Her long neck, with its delicate lines, suggested pearls. She had pearls, but she did not dare wear them in these days. They were buried in the courtyard of the old log house.

When she walked it was with a slow and languorous grace. The carriage of her beautiful head was reminiscent of the portraits of the members of the Imperial family which had once hung on the walls of the home from which she had fled. It was now only a charred ruin.

Katerin remained at the window, peering out with anxious eyes. A trio of Cossack soldiers were huddled about the glowing remnants of their night-fire in the street. These were men in the army of the Ataman Zorogoff, the half-Mongol, half-Cossack *hetman* who ruled the Valley of Despair. The Ataman, in spite of his pretensions to leadership, was only a brigand with an army of adventurers and conscripts at his back, bent upon enriching himself by levying upon the fortunes of all the rich people in his territory. And he collected the tribute which he exacted from them under threats of death — and by executions.

Katerin watched the gray light of the new day grow over the frozen and desolate landscape. A thin mantle of snow covered the plains below the hills which walled in the valley on three sides. There were a few rude peasants' huts out on the flats, with white smoke rising up from stone chimneys. A long column of staggering telegraph poles ran off beyond a spur of hill and marked the line of the railroad in this direction.

She saw a small band of Cossacks come galloping in toward the city. They were racing to the warmth of the barracks after a night spent on patrol. These men belonged to the outer cordon — the chain of mounted soldiers which Zorogoff kept about the city to make sure no

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one entered without his knowledge, and to insure that none escaped. Before he had organized his power, some of the wealthy citizens had escaped by the railroad, but now the Ataman had his troops on guard at the railroad station. And his spies were busy in the city. It was impossible to leave if he did not grant permission. The Kirsakoffs did not dare to ask for it. |

The room in which Katerin stood looking out of the window was filled with a queer mingling of rich furnishings and crudely built peasant household goods. The floor was covered with a thick blue carpet, thrown down hastily after being smuggled by night from her old home before the building had been burned. Faithful servants had brought it, but there had been no attempt to put it down properly — it was merely tucked in at the sides of the room in order to make the fabric fit.

The walls were covered with an ancient and faded paper. The ceiling had once been covered with colorful decorations, but now the plaster was cracked, and leaks in the roof had turned the paint of the figures into grotesque patterns.

The bed was hidden by a Chinese screen of carved leather, also saved from the old home before the looters had plied the torch; a great samovar of chased and filigreed silver stood upon an old wooden bench brought from the kitchen on the floor below; a table of rough boards was covered by purple silk, and on it stood an ornate candelabra of marble and bronze with the arms sadly bent, so that the candles could not stand erect; blankets of fur covered chairs rudely cut with an ax and fashioned with a primitive hammer; and a monstrous black stove built into the wall reached to the ceiling.

Katerin pulled the blanket away from the window and made it fast to the casing with a string. Just then a gentle tapping came at one of the doors of the room.

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She laughed cheerily and opened the door. Her father stood before her.

General Kirsakoff was tall, but thin and bent with age. His face was gaunt, but the bones of his cheeks were partly concealed by a white beard which was indifferently trimmed to a point at the chin. His gray eyes were dim, yet held some of their old fire and the look of an eagle — stern eyes looking out from under gray brows and a forehead furrowed by worries and his years. His head was covered with sparse white hair, which had a tendency to stand straight up, and waved when he moved his head quickly.

“Ah, the cold is like a wolf!” said Michael, his hands clasped together as he shivered. “Has not Wassili come up with the fire? My teeth ache from the cold!”

Katerin gave him a look of solicitude, and then took his hands and rubbed them.

“I thought you would sleep longer, so I did not call for Wassili. And here you are dressed — but you should have a blanket over your shoulders.”

“It is only my feet and my hands — and my teeth — that are cold. Let us have the samovar singing, and something hot. My poor old bones cannot stand the cold so well as they did. And this old house is damp — we must have a good fire to-day, happen what will.”

He looked at Katerin closely, searching her face for signs of anxiety, but her whole manner had changed at his entrance to the room, and now as she went to the door to the hallway to call down to Wassili, the servant, she hummed a tune. She knew her father well enough to understand that his spirit must be kept up. He had been giving way recently to long spells of despondency.

Michael was wearing one of his old uniforms of a general. It had been Katerin's idea that he resume the discarded garments of authority, for she knew that he gained

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some comfort from it and that it helped him to forget the dark days which had come upon them. But Michael was only a shadow of his former self. His knees bent under him, his attenuated form did not fill the tunic, his hands were white and withered. They shook, as did his head at times, with the palsy of his age and feebleness. Yet the old general was still a striking figure in the gray tunic with the white cross hanging from its collar, the wreath and sword of another order of the Czar on his breast. A leather strap crossed his shoulder and came down athwart the front of the tunic. The heavy gold straps on his shoulders marked his rank. His trousers were blue with a pair of narrow gold stripes at the sides, and the belt about him had a silver buckle in front with the double-headed eagle of the Romanoffs.

"So this is another day, little daughter," said Michael, as he sat down upon a bench and stroked his beard. "Another day of waiting — waiting till these devils have lost their power to the army of the Emperor."

"Another day of hope, my father," said Katerin. "What! Does not the day at the windows give you courage. Perhaps the Americans will come up from Vladivostok and save us. It is then that Zorogoff will have to change his ways."

"Poof! The Americans will not come," said Michael wearily. "Do not put your hopes in the foreigners. Nothing will happen from that direction which will be of any good to us."

"Something is bound to happen that is good for us," insisted Katerin. "The forces of evil cannot always be in power. Have we not sent word to our friends who escaped? Will they not get our letters? Will they not do something to get us away from the city? All we must do is to have patience and be brave. God is with the brave."

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"Yes, the young are brave," said Michael. "And it is you who are brave, my daughter. I am too old to have much heart left. But there are two things against us — one of them is our accursed money. I wish we had never saved it, but for that you will need it."

"And what is the other thing that is against us?" asked Katerin with surprised eyes, as she turned to the door to look below for Wassili.

"Your beauty, Katerin Stephanovna," said her father. "How many times in the old days have I thanked the holy saints for your beauty! Yet I mourn now that you are so beautiful, for it may be your curse. I have had a dream of evil omen, yet I cannot remember it — though it left me downcast. If these devils of Zorogoff dare lay a hand upon you ——"

Katerin ran to him and kissed him hastily.

"Oh, nonsense! I will not be so beautiful, and you will not be so depressed as soon as the samovar sings and you have had your tea. You make much of little things — and you must not keep dreams in your mind. Now! Here comes Wassili with the fire for the samovar!"

Wassili came in, a whiskered *moujik* in clumsy boots, bearing fire on a shovel. Some of the burning coals he put into the stove, and with the scattered remnants fired the samovar and went below again for water.

"It is more dangerous to give the money than to keep it," went on Michael musingly. He seemed bent on studying out the problems which confronted him, as if the dream which he had mentioned had driven him into making some decision.

"If we could buy our way out of the city," suggested Katerin, "I would be willing to give it up to see you in comfortable surroundings." She was before a little mirror on a table, combing out her hair.

"Once Zorogoff had the money, he would destroy us so

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there would be no witness against him — no claim against him in future,” said Michael. “That is what happened to Rioumines — he gave up his money willingly — and then he was killed. So there is no safety for us in begging ourselves. By the Holy Saints! I would rather burn all the rubles than give them to Zorogoff — but even then he would not believe that they had been destroyed, and would kill us for refusing to surrender them. And I would sooner die a beggar than have your fortune fall into the hands of this Mongol!”

“Come! Sit by the fire and warm yourself,” said Katerin, pushing a bench toward the front of the stove, which was now crackling merrily with the wood. “We are safe enough here till the Americans come.”

“Oh, the Americans will never come,” said Michael, as he settled himself before the fire and held out his hands to the heat. “We must use our wits and get away from Chita — to Harbin or Vladivostok. Others have done it. We might send Wassili to Harbin for help.”

“That would do no good. Our friends cannot come back here to help us. If they did, they could not fight Zorogoff’s army. We must keep up good hope for whatever the future holds for us, and ——”

There came a hammering at the outer gate of the courtyard. Katerin checked her words and stood immovable, her eyes on her father in sudden fear of what the summons below might mean. The noise outside stopped as abruptly as it had begun, and then was resumed — insistent, compelling, ruthless. It sounded like the thumping of rifle butts against the planks of the gate. Whoever it was that demanded admittance was not to be denied. There was in the noise a peremptoriness which indicated that if there happened to be any appreciable delay in opening the gate, it would be smashed down without further ado.

“What is that?” asked Michael. “By the Holy

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Saints! The soldiers of the Ataman have come upon us!"

He sprang up and went to the window, where he put his eye to the hole in the frost, and looked out. Katerin pressed close to him.

"Soldiers at the gate!" whispered Michael, and as he stood staring at his daughter, they heard Wassili shouting in the hall below.

"Master! Master!"

Katerin crossed herself and bowed her head in the direction of the icon as she ran to the door and called down to Wassili, asking what it was that he wanted.

"The soldiers are outside — pounding to get in!"

"Then let them in," commanded Katerin. "We cannot fight them." She ran back across the room to the window and looked down to the court — she could see the tops of the tall Cossack caps over the upper edge of the paling. There were at least a dozen of them, and above them here and there was the glittering point of a bayonet.

"We are in God's hands!" cried Katerin.

"We shall know what fate holds for us now," said her father, drawing up toward the stove. "We have been in doubt long enough. It was the smoke from our chimney which drew them, without doubt."

"They will want the money," said Katerin. "It may as well go to them — enough to stop their greed."

Michael went to her and put his hands upon her shoulders. He looked into her face, tears in his own eyes. "We will not give them the money," he whispered. "Let them kill me if they will. I doubt that they will dare to do it — but my time is short at best. This is my dream! But you must think of yourself and know that if they take all we have, you will be helpless — a beggar in a land that is beggared, to die of hunger or by your own hand. Make

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no bargain with them between me and the money! I command you! Do not give a ruble of it to keep me alive a minute!"

"If you die, I shall not live," said Katerin, and taking his face between her hands, kissed him tenderly on the forehead and threw her arms about his neck, dry-eyed in her anguish.

"I should like to reach the sky, but my arms are too short," said Michael, expressing his helplessness by the old Russian proverb. "I think of having an army at my back — I, an old man, weak and already looking into my own grave. It is of you I think, Katerin Stephanovna! I would sell my soul to save you — yet the money must be kept if you are to live!"

"I can hear the soldiers in the yard," said Katerin. "What can we do? We have a few rubles in the Chinese casket — five thousand in fives and tens. They make a fat bundle. We can give them up — and say they are all we have."

"Do not be too ready to surrender the money," said Michael. "But that is what we shall do. If they demand more —"

"Hush! They are coming up the stairs. Come! Quick! Sit here by the table! And take your saber! Be bold with them, as befits your rank and your old place, but remember that we cannot resist!"

As she talked, Katerin grabbed from a chest her father's saber and snapped it into the old general's belt. Then she pulled him to the table and sat him on a bench so that he faced toward the fire. This was no more than done when a man could be heard mounting the top of the stairs, and presently the visitor looked in cautiously at the open door.

The intruder was a Cossack officer. He wore a tall cap of white, shaggy wool, thrust back on his head. A

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lock of his black hair hung down athwart his forehead. His eyes were black and small, his mouth heavily lipped, his cheeks inclined to swartheness from exposure, though the cold of the morning had given his skin a ruddy glow. He wore a long greatcoat with the cream-colored skin of the sheep outside and the wool inside visible at the edge in front and at the bottom of the skirt. On his shoulders were tin stars—he was a captain in Zorogoff's army. From the skirt of his coat on one side hung the toe of a heavy saber-scabbard.

The captain stepped into the room after a sharp glance at Katerin and her father. Then he looked about the room suspiciously, and having made sure that no others were present, he bowed politely, at the same time clicking the spurred heels of his black boots.

"You are Kirsakoff," said the officer abruptly. "I am Captain Shimilin, and I have come from the Ataman Zorogoff."

Michael, his hand on the hilt of his saber, sitting erect, turned his head and surveyed the Cossack coldly. Finally, he said, "Captain, you are speaking to General Kirsakoff."

Shimilin shrugged his shoulders, and a smile lurked on his lips. "You were once a general—but the Czar is dead. I do not have to be told who you are, Kirsakoff."

"Oh, you have heard of the Czar!" said Katerin.

Shimilin stared at her, and then took off his cap. He seemed willing to ignore her irony, but his look conveyed an appreciation of her beauty, and he allowed his eyes to linger upon her. But there was no disrespect in his manner.

Katerin met his steady gaze without any indication that the Cossack captain's scrutiny meant anything more than the usual deference and adulation due her person and position as in the old days. She made a pretty picture,

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standing beside her father — the superb carriage of her head, the slashes of red velvet of her sleeves, the gray of the sable coat and the swirl of the red trailing skirt about her feet. She suggested a queenly consort at an audience by royalty.

Shimilin stood as if waiting for something to happen. In a short time two men came in with rifles. Their faces were rotund, their noses short and flat, and they were dark enough to be full-blood Mongols — Buriats, these were, descendants of the men who had followed Genghis Khan as his conquering hordes swept over Asia. They were poorly dressed in ragged, old coats, with boots reinforced with skins and furs wrapped about their tops. But they wore the high caps of Cossacks, which made them appear to be taller than they really were. This pair appraised the contents of the room, and having judged the value of its visible loot, turned their beadlike eyes upon Katerin — eyes full of menace, eyes like the eyes of wolves upon a quarry.

“Have you come with a message from the Ataman?” asked Katerin, when she saw that the Cossack did not seem to know how to proceed with his business. She wanted to hold the situation in her own hands as well as she could, and so far she felt that Shimilin had not shown himself to be particularly dangerous. She did not intend to betray to him that she and her father were in any way perturbed by an informal call on the part of soldiers from the Ataman Zorogoff. To show fear would be fatal and only her wits could save her.

The Cossack did not reply at once, but strode across the room, threw off his greatcoat, and sat down on a bench opposite Michael. Shimilin seemed in no hurry, but acted as if he wished to impress father and daughter with his own importance as expressed in his uniform. He wore a gray tunic with gold shoulder straps, a brace of

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pistols in his belt, a fine saber with a hilt of silver, and blue riding breeches.

"Yes, I bring a message from the Ataman," he began, elbows on knees, and leaning forward and staring at the floor. "You know, of course, that the Ataman's army has been protecting the city from looters."

"Beggars are always safe from robbers," said Michael. Shimilin lifted his head and looked at the general in surprise.

"Beggars! I like a joke, Kirsakoff."

"It is no joke being a beggar," put in Katerin.

"You have millions of rubles," said Shimilin.

"It is easy to count the money in the pockets of other people," said Katerin. "We were robbed of all we had long before the Ataman Zorogoff began to rule."

Shimilin's face took on a sly look. "Is it that you do not like the Ataman Zorogoff? Are you opposed to his rule?"

"I suppose Zorogoff would give up his power if we said we preferred another ruler," retorted Katerin. "If you came here to trick us into saying anything against Zorogoff, it will not be said. And it takes little of your breath to talk of millions of rubles. Does the Ataman expect us to hand over to him a fortune which does not exist?"

"You talk like all the others," said Shimilin wearily. "Partridges are killed with silver bullets — and so are robbers. An army cannot live on air. The Ataman needs money."

"Protection from bandits! What difference does it make whether bandits and looters take our money, or Zorogoff?" asked Michael sharply. "If we had the money — what would it matter to us who got it if we lost it?"

"The Ataman asks a loan," said Shimilin. "His government will repay you. Am I to tell the Ataman that you regard him as a robber?"

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"We have but a few rubles," said Katerin hastily, to prevent her father from saying something which would draw the wrath of the captain, for the old man was showing his anger and was ready to defy Shimilin. "It is all the money we have left."

"How much?" asked Shimilin.

"Probably ten thousand rubles," said Katerin. "I have not counted it lately, but it is all we have to buy our food. What shall we eat if you take it?"

Shimilin smiled. "That is not my problem. You can find more money, or borrow. But we know you have plenty. Ten thousand rubles will not satisfy the Ataman. I will take it, but only with the understanding that it is mine — to intercede with the Ataman for you. You might find it difficult to argue with his soldiers — in his military prison."

Katerin shrugged her shoulders. "True. If the Ataman should want to send us to prison, we could not prevent him. At least, he would have to feed us there."

"And is that the way Zorogoff will protect us from robbers?" demanded Michael. "If we have no more money, we must go to prison, eh! And that is what Zorogoff calls ruling, I presume. Hah!"

Katerin went behind the screen which shielded her bed and returned with a large lacquered cabinet. She opened it and took out several packets of rubles of the old Imperial issue.

"This is our fortune," she said, with a gesture at the casket, and turned away.

"Do you expect the Ataman to believe that?" asked Shimilin, as he stood up and looked into the casket.

"I cannot do the Ataman's thinking," she retorted. "I do not give it — you must take it."

Shimilin got into his greatcoat, and leisurely stuffed his pockets with the packets. When he had taken the

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last, he bowed to the glowering Michael in a show of politeness.

“I will do what I can with the Ataman in your behalf,” he said. “But I doubt if I will be able to alter his intentions toward you — and I am sure that we shall meet again.”

And Shimilin made a gesture to his two soldiers, walked through the door, and the trio clumped down the stairs.

“This means war with the Ataman,” said Michael, as they heard the gate creak on its ancient hinges as their visitors went into the street. “Before prison, we shall take the poison together, my daughter.”

“We shall not die by our own hands till the last minute,” said Katerin. “We must pray that the Americans will come.”

“If they come at all it will be too late,” said Michael. “We, who have conquered Asia, will be destroyed by Asia — we shall be lost in a yellow flood. The Mongol rules now.”

II

THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER

AN American army transport came lurching out of the Japanese sea, and, following the lead of a gray and gaunt destroyer which had come out to meet the troopship, she swung slowly into the Gulf of Peter the Great.

The cliffs of the shore line of Siberia looked bleak and wind-whipped, desolate and snow-slashed. The first blasts of winter had swept the land. Brown and dull it looked, sullenly waiting the onset of northern winds with smothering cold from the Pole.

The transport seemed reluctant to approach the shore of such an inhospitable land. Her gray war-painted sides were festooned with sea-grime from the Pacific. Her pace was slow, as if she mistrusted the hills overhanging Vladivostok. She was all for caution, though the tumbling destroyer drove ahead of her like a terrier leading the way for a suspicious mastiff.

Among the officers crowding the upper deck of the transport was a young man wearing single silver bars on the shoulders of his khaki tunic. On his collar were little circles of bronze enclosing eagles fashioned from the same metal. To those who understood such things, they proclaimed him to be a First Lieutenant of the Intelligence Division of the General Staff of the United States Army.

Lieutenant Gordon was a sturdy chap, of good height. His cleanly shaven face was inclined to ruddiness. His chin was generously molded, his jaw had a squat squareness to it which gave the lower half of his face a suggestion

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of grimness, but the good-natured twinkle of his blue eyes belied this grimness. Still, he was reserved — perhaps too serious for one of his age, too moodily self-contained.

He had kept to himself a good deal on the passage of the transport from San Francisco. While others of his age had been romping the decks and singing and making gay, he had clung to his cabin. He said that he was studying Russian.

When the transport began to draw near to the coast of Siberia, Gordon had stood nearly all day alone in a sheltered nook at the head of the upper deck where the shrouds came down to the rail and prevented more than one person's getting into the corner. He seemed always to gravitate to spots in the ship which would insure his being alone or cut off in some way from the crowds. Then he would stand motionless, gazing out over the bows to the horizon ahead, busy with his own thoughts.

Yet for all his aloofness, Lieutenant Gordon was an affable chap. And he was keenly interested in all things Russian — showed a most laudable ambition to learn all he possibly could about the country in which he was to serve. There was a captain at Gordon's table who had a cabin full of books about Russia, and Gordon listened most attentively to the informal lectures by the well-read captain.

And there was a major who had been military attaché in Petrograd. He spoke Russian well, and gave lessons in the language to the other officers. Gordon attended some of the lessons, but his progress in learning the language was distressingly slow. Still, Gordon did extremely well at times. One day the major had asked the class to repeat a Russian sentence. Gordon was the only one to repeat the words with anything approaching correctness.

"Splendid!" exclaimed the major enthusiastically.

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“You are getting a good accent. That’s really excellent, Mr. Gordon. And somehow you resemble Russians — if it were not for your uniform, you might easily be taken for a Russian.”

The class laughed. Gordon reddened. When he was asked to repeat another sentence in Russian, he rather bungled it. And that day he quit the Russian class, saying that he could learn faster alone with his grammar. And he kept more to himself after that.

So no one thought it strange that Lieutenant Gordon preferred to stand by himself at the head of the upper deck as the transport was nosing into the harbor of Vladivostok. He scanned the islands sliding past, and he watched the boat which came out flying the white and blue flag of the Czar’s navy — the old Cross of St. Andrew. He watched the shattered hulks of the navy of the Second Nicholas, lying in on the beach like the bones of dead sea birds. And he saw the warships of Britain, of France, of Japan, of the United States, all spick and span at anchor below the city.

Many strange flags flew from the tops of buildings on the terraced streets over the bay. The green spires of churches glistened in the afternoon sun. Soon the gashes running down to the water were seen to be streets with people moving in them — carriages, motor cars, and hurrying throngs of civilians and soldiers.

On the hills above the city was a queer fringe of flat white piles, some of them sheeted with canvas. These were vast stores of things gathered to the port from all the world for the war against Germany — acres of goods and metals, all idle and wasting because the throne of the Romanoffs had toppled and the Czar himself was dead in a well.

The transport moved up to a dock at the end of the bay, past the city. Gordon stood in his nook, watching

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Vladivostok pass in review before him, and listening to the comments of the other officers who crowded the upper deck for their first sight of this far port of a shattered dynasty.

As the troopship warped in, Russians in belted blouses and great boots stood on the dock and stared up at the ship and its soldiers in khaki from a distant land. These Russians loafed and gossiped and ate sunflower seeds. Cossack soldiers in high woolly caps swaggered about with sabers jingling at their sides. German prisoners of war labored with heavy cases. These men were still clad in the dirty finery of gaudy uniforms, sorry-looking specimens of what had been once smart soldiers. Shaggy horses in rude wagons, driven by peasant girls with shawls over their heads and wearing men's heavy boots, did the work of strong men with sacks and bales, loading the carts. The Russians could find nothing else to do but gossip.

Gordon watched the people on the dock with interest. When the hawsers were fast to the pier, he left the deck and went to his cabin. There, alone, he loaded his automatic pistol. He filled extra magazines with the blunt-nosed bullets, and distributed the magazines through his pockets in such way that they would not be noticeable through the fabric of his garments.

He looked at himself in the mirror on the bulkhead. His face had increased its grimness, and the blue of his eyes had taken on a steely sheen. He seemed to be angry about something. But he forced a smile at himself — a tight-lipped smile of satisfaction.

"Speed is good for nothing but catching fleas," he whispered to his image in the glass.

Soon an orderly came to tell him that an automobile waited on the dock to take all officers who had to report direct to Headquarters to the building in the city where the Commanding General and his staff were housed. Gor-

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don followed the orderly, and stepping from the end of the gangplank, saluted the land.

The car bumped away up the street with a group of officers. Gordon was silent, while the others chattered. The water-front streets were muddy and unpaved. Squalid buildings with crude signs in Russian announced that within many of the buildings might be had tea and food and liquors. Pigs were loose in the streets, scratching themselves amiably on house-corners. Old Russian songs were being bawled from lusty throats of roisterers inside the *kabaks*. Russians wandered about aimlessly, staring at all the strange things which had come to Siberia — the American army mules, the motor cycles whizzing about among the pigs and wagons, and the honking car with the party of American officers.

Everybody seemed on holiday but the Chinese. They trotted about with burdens on their backs, working like ants, apparently unaware that freedom had come to Russia and that no one need work. Military motors were shooting about in all directions, dilapidated trolley cars packed with humanity creaked over bad rails, droshkies careened crazily among the burden-bearing Chinese coolies.

The car carrying Gordon rolled into the Svetlanskaya, the main street of Vladivostok, and began to climb one of the many hills. There was a great stream of confused traffic, and mixed in it were strange men in uniforms — black Annamites in French blue, yellow Japanese in buff, bronzed Czechs in brown, Cossacks in natural gray; Canadians in brown short coats, and Americans in snuff-colored khaki. On them all were the musty odors and the ancient dust of Asia.

The city was a place of swarming tangles of people — beggars and princes, vagabonds and viceroys, generals and stragglers, friends and enemies, conquerors and conquered, all whirling about in mad antics and hurrying as

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if they expected the end of the world to come with sundown. Refugees from the interior carrying their few poor possessions in old blankets mingled with nobles of the old régime who still tried to keep up a semblance of importance; poor women in rags with frightened red eyes and crying children clustered about them stood on the curbs and stared at foreign-looking ladies lolling in carriages and clad in suspicious grandeur. The human parasites had gathered from all the ports of the Orient to this land where people were starving in the streets. Adventurers seeking command and harpies hoping to get their fingers into stolen jewels, pushed aside blind beggars to get into the cafés.

The crisp cold air of winter was seething with joy. There were flags everywhere. The restaurants were crowded with people who lacked lodgings, gabbling, whispering, gaming. But there was something sinister lurking in the background of the mad show, glimpsed now and then in a squad of soldiers with bayonets fixed to their rifles and marching from some mysterious place to some other mysterious place with an attitude of deadly earnestness. The temper of the people was fickle. They were ready to rally to any leader who presented some dramatic ideal, or to submit to any ruler who was strong enough to subdue them by force of arms. But just now they were occupied with having a grand celebration and believed that life from now on would be nothing but a carnival.

The car carrying Gordon and the other officers arrived at the big building overlooking the bay where flew the flag of the United States — American Staff Headquarters. Gordon found the Chief of Intelligence in a large room filled with map-makers, translators, clerks, officers, busy orderlies. But Gordon did not approach the desk of his chief at once. The grave-faced colonel with spectacles was busy just then, and Gordon lingered among the office

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workers. There was a great buzzing of conversation and a mighty clacking of typewriters.

Gordon was keenly interested in everything. The walls were covered with maps of the Russian empire stuck full of tacks with colored heads — the fever spots of a sick nation, showing where the disease was most rampant and dangerous. And Gordon listened to the talk of the Russians, who discussed the Americans frankly, knowing that they were not understood by the strangers.

In time Gordon presented himself at the colonel's desk, saluted, gave his name, and turned over certain papers. The colonel looked him over casually, not especially interested that another Intelligence officer had been added to his staff by Washington.

"You'll want to look about the city, Mr. Gordon, after your month in a transport. You'll be quartered in this building. Report to me again in the morning," said the colonel.

So Lieutenant Gordon spent the afternoon in the teeming cafés along the Svetlanskaya. He mingled with the various factions scattered through the city — monarchists, anarchists, nihilists out of a job, German secret agents, and the adherents of new men and new parties intriguing for power with the next throw of the national dice. It was all a great orgy of talking and whispering and singing. Gordon could make neither head nor tail of it. But he watched the throngs closely. Every man got a scrutiny from the American lieutenant. An observer might think that Gordon was looking for some particular person in all that motley throng.

At the officers' mess that evening Gordon overheard a conversation in which the necessity of sending an Intelligence officer to Irkutsk was discussed. And Gordon was on the alert at once. He said nothing, but he watched the Chief of Intelligence up at the head of the table and

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followed him from the mess-room to his desk upstairs.

"Sir," began Gordon, "I understand that an officer will be sent up toward Lake Baikal — Irkutsk — to look into the situation there."

The colonel looked at Gordon wonderingly. It struck the chief that this new arrival was dipping into things rather hastily. There was enough to learn around Vladivostok for a stranger, thought the colonel.

"Yes, it has been mentioned," said the colonel. "We need an observing officer up there. That country is controlled now by Zorogoff, the Ataman of the Cossacks, and we don't know any too much about Zorogoff. What do you know about him?"

"Nothing, sir. But I would like to — see the country."

"You ought to have a little more time to get acquainted with the situation here before you go into the interior. The Baikal region is a long way from here."

"Yes, sir," said Gordon. "I don't want to appear too confident of my own abilities, but it strikes me, sir, that the back country explains what is going on here, rather than what you see here explains the country."

The colonel smiled. "You like to travel, young man."

"Yes, sir. Frankly, I'd like to see all I can."

"Have you been assigned to any duty here yet?"

"No, sir. Perhaps when I got back from the Baikal region I'd be more valuable — have a better understanding of the situation as a whole."

"I'll think it over," said the colonel, and reached for his ringing telephone.

And the colonel evidently did think it over, for within an hour Lieutenant Gordon was handed his orders to leave at once for Irkutsk in a train carrying Czech soldiers and supplies toward Omsk and that place known so vaguely as "the front." And an American soldier who was a native

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of Russia was detailed to accompany Lieutenant Gordon as an orderly and interpreter.

Gordon did not delay. He went at once to the Trans-Siberian station to find his train, leaving the Russian orderly to bring on baggage and bedding-roll. Gordon found the station filled to overflowing with refugees from the interior — sick and well, women and children, lame and blind, hungry and unclean. They lay on the floors, cooking and eating, begging and filching food wherever they could find it. They were like a dirty froth thrown up on a beach after a tidal wave, a pitiful human wreckage fighting for existence after having survived a typhoon which had destroyed a nation. The sights, the smells, the misery were appalling. It almost made Gordon ill. He longed to find some one person who could be blamed for it. A wrath began to grow in his soul.

He stumbled down the railroad yards in the growing dark, seeking the train among a labyrinth of box cars. Though he was already in his furs and his sheepskin-lined coat against the wolf of winter which was howling across the landscape, the wind from the bay chilled him to his bones.

Candles gleaming through the windows of an old fourth-class car drew him. He found soldiers within — Czechs cooking their supper of stew over crude heating stoves amid clouds of yellow sulphurous smoke from the awful Manchurian coal.

The interior of the car was so jammed with men that there seemed to be no more room. The shelves were full of soldiers, and the floor was littered with coal and wood and boxes and bundles. It was like a pen on wheels, that car. It was filthy, battered, and broken. But it belonged to the train leaving for the front, and Gordon was content.

Presently the orderly came, laden with baggage. He

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explained to the Czechs that the American officer was to travel in that car by order of the Czech commandant. The soldiers smiled and provided two shelves. And in a few minutes the train began to grind slowly away from Vladivostok, to carry Lieutenant Gordon and his orderly some two thousand versts away.

They reached Nikolsk-Ussurisk the next morning. An American captain came to the train. His orderly had been sent back to Vladivostok, ill. The captain was without an interpreter.

"Look here," said Gordon. "You can't go on here without an interpreter — and I'll not need mine till I get to Irkutsk. You'll have a new interpreter sent up to you by that time. I'm all right on this train — for a week or two. Send mine along to me when I telegraph where I am."

"Well, that's an idea!" said the captain. "A most pious idea! Perhaps I can send your man along after you in a couple of days. He can catch this train all right, on a passenger train."

"Hold my man, sir, till you hear from me," said Gordon. "I'll wire when I need him. There is a Czech in this car who speaks fairly good English. I'll get on all right."

"Now that's mighty decent of you," said the captain. "What's your name — so there won't be any hitch about sending your man on?"

"Gordon, sir — Peter Gordon." And the train rumbled on, leaving behind the native of Russia who had been detailed as interpreter for Lieutenant Peter Gordon.

The railroad followed old caravan trails into Manchuria and Mongolia, over plains and up through mountains in which yellow *bonzes* hid themselves from the world on sky-kissing peaks in secret monasteries. Then, winding down through the passes, the train traversed the millet

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plains where the conquerors of ancient Tartary and China recruited their hordes of warriors — and on into the wilderness of Siberia where wolves still ruled.

The land was now held in the grip of a desperate cold. The wheels whined as they ground along on frosty rails. Bridges lay in ruins across rivers, replaced by shaky structures of logs that swayed and groaned under the weight of the train.

And at every station Peter found mobs of refugees fighting to get aboard anything that moved. Some were trying to get to Vladivostok, some wanted to go in the opposite direction to Perm, or Ufa, or Samara. They wanted to get anywhere but where they were. Long strings of box cars in the sidings were packed with men, women, and children, ragged, filthy, hungry, dying, dead. Those alive threshed grain by hand from the rotting piles in the fields, or fished in the rivers with wooden spears. And there were trains coming back from the front filled with human derelicts — in cattle cars festooned with crimson icicles!

Yet the people seemed patient in their misery. They waited patiently while first one faction rose to power only to fall again. And usurpers gambled for power with bands of brigands which their leaders called armies. The people had destroyed one government. Now they waited for some one to create another for them.

Lieutenant Peter Gordon watched day by day in silence. At times, his eyes flamed with anger. But he smiled sometimes, too, when he mixed with peasants in the station restaurants and ate cabbage soup with a wooden spoon. For the peasants had many queer and amusing things to say about the *Americansky* after they had assured themselves that the stranger could speak but a few words of Russian, and understood less. But Peter understood enough to know that these peasants were not at all

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friendly to officers, no matter what country they came from. They wanted no aristocrats in Siberia, American or otherwise. They were going to kill all the aristocrats, and be free men. They were not going to leave all the land to aristocrats, and pay taxes so that their rulers could make slaves of them. Not any more.

One evening Peter strolled up toward the engine while the train was stopped in a station.

"When will we get to Chita?" he asked the engineer.

"Perhaps to-morrow."

"Are you sure we won't go through Chita sometime to-night?"

"No, not to-night. Not till long after daylight."

"Thank you," said Peter, and walked away. The Russian engineer stared after the American officer in bewildered surprise, for the American officer was speaking in perfect Russian. There was something queer about it, the engineer knew — but, of course, Americans are educated and speak all languages. Still, that was the first one the engineer had ever heard who could speak the Czar's Russian — as good as the conductor.

III

THE FIRING SQUAD

AFTER Captain Shimilin's demand for a million rubles for the Ataman Zorogoff, Katerin and her father knew that they were no longer safe. They had a fortune hidden in the old log house. It consisted of packets of Imperial rubles which had been smuggled from Kirsakoff's bank before the looters had begun their raids in the city. The soldiers would come now and strip the house of all its contents to find the money. And if they did find the money, Michael and Katerin would be accused of opposing Zorogoff's government and dealt with as many of the friends of the Kirsakoffs had already been dealt with — a secret firing squad in a prison yard at dawn.

As Michael had said, to surrender the fortune would not mean safety. Others had done that, only to be destroyed so that no embarrassing claims might be made against Zorogoff in the future. Zorogoff was but a brigand chief, maintaining an army at the expense of the wealthy people in his district and using the peasants and former workmen to build up his new autocracy — destroy the aristocrats with the workers and then enslave the workers who had done the business for him. Thus he played the poor against the rich and controlled both. And it was his purpose to leave none living who understood his aims.

In Michael's room there was a stove of tile built into the wall. It reached to the ceiling, and stuck out into the room like the half of a supporting pillar — a great black

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column faced with blackened zinc sheets of half-cylinders. At the bottom was a small iron door to admit the wood, with a circular damper through which the flames might be seen when there was fire in the stove. But the Kirsakoffs did not use this stove. They used their scant supply of fuel in the stove in Katerin's room, not only to conserve their heat in the most comfortable room, but to reduce the amount of smoke visible from the chimneys outside during the day.

The stove in Michael's room had been selected as the hiding place for the Imperial notes which had been smuggled from the bank weeks before. It was Katerin's idea that the packets could be stacked against the tiles on the outside of the stove, and the sheets of zinc replaced. And unless a fire was maintained in the stove for a time long enough to heat the tiles to the danger point, the paper money would not be injured. If the Cossacks came to search for the money, she planned to light a smoldering fire in the stove. And by night, a couple of candles in behind some pieces of charred wood, would throw out light through the damper so that it would appear that the stove was burning.

The packets of rubles were now concealed in a lot of discarded peasants' clothing. The various garments had been distributed through the house, but Katerin had gathered them in her father's room, and was ripping them open, while Michael was preparing the stove for the money by removing the zinc facing against the tiles.

It was the evening of the day on which Shimilin had visited them. Katerin was ripping open old gray coats which smelled of stables and were covered with patches, breeches contrived out of cloth and the old skins of animals, uncouth jerkins which had originally been padded with cotton against the cold of many long-gone Siberian winters.

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The windows were blanketed to keep the candlelight from being seen in the street below, and father and daughter talked in low tones as they worked, while Wassili and the old woman below in the kitchen kept a sharp watch against intruders.

Michael stood on a bench and worked out the screws which held the zinc plates in place against the wall. It was now so cold in the room that his breath showed white in the light of the candles, for they had let the fire in his room die early, and the door to Katerin's room was kept closed so that the heat might not escape from it.

"Be careful lest the metal sheets fall and make a clatter," warned Katerin as she stripped open an old coat, and released a shower of packets of rubles of large denomination, from which the face of the dead Czar smiled up at her wistfully from the engraving. The rubles made a colorful pile at her feet — blues, crimsons, and yellows, some worth a hundred rubles, some worth a thousand.

"Now!" said Michael, as he lifted off the top plate. "We are ready for the hiding — and my back is nearly broken, too. May Zorogoff break his neck if he ever finds where it is hidden!"

Katerin got to her feet and looked up at the rude clay tiles and the stone blocks mortared in behind them. The fire did not touch the tiles — they merely retained the heat and radiated it slowly into the room. And between the stone blocks and the tiles there was an air space, wider in some places than in others, so that the thickness of the packets of money would have to be gauged for the crevices they were to fill.

Katerin began filling the spaces under the zinc plates above the stove door. Then the plate above was put into place, and the aperture behind it packed with money. They worked more than an hour before they had disposed of the bulk of the packets. They could hear the calling

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of the sentries in the streets. At times Michael and Katerin stopped and listened to the cracking of the frost in the timbers of the house, and once they put out the candles when they thought they heard the gate to the courtyard being opened cautiously. But the noise proved to be but a whim of the wind with the boards hanging loosely from the roof of the old wagon-shed.

When all the zinc plates were back in place, Katerin took a piece of candle, and putting charred sticks of wood back into the stove, she so arranged the candle that when she lighted the wick and closed the iron door, a flickering light appeared through the holes in the door.

"We have a fire in the stove," she said to her father. "Who is to look for paper rubles in a burning stove? When the soldiers come to search, you have a fire going in an instant. And the wood can burn and not harm the rubles."

"We could not do better," said Michael. "Your wits will save us yet. And that money is all that stands between you and beggary — even I, alive, without the fortune, could not save you from hunger and cold. There is your treasure! It must be saved to you, my daughter, at all cost."

"I care only for you, my father," said Katerin. "And now you are tired and worn — to bed, for we must keep our strength and have our sleep, even though disaster crouches in the future."

She kissed him, and went to her own room to get behind the blankets which curtained the window and to blow a tiny hole in the frost coating the pane. Outside, the night was brilliant, with a haloed moon throwing a silvery sheen over the glistening plains, with a tree here and there doubly black from its shadow on the powdery snow. Out in the end of the street the fire of the sentries was burn-

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ing redly. It threw into heavy relief the black forms squatting about the glowing coals.

"Merciful God!" she whispered in prayer. "Are we to be saved? Help must come to us, or we perish!"

She closed the blankets and went back to her father's room. She made sure that he was properly covered, kissed him tenderly, and took away the candle, for she had known him to lie all night smoking cigarettes till the dawn by candle light.

In her own room once more, she prayed before the icon, and prepared for bed. Worn out with the worry of the day and anxiety for what the new day might bring, she finally fell asleep.

But the next day came and went without any word or sign from the Ataman that he was dissatisfied with the report of Captain Shimilin. Several days passed, and still there was nothing to indicate that Zorogoff would annoy them again. Michael began to have hopes that something would happen which might distract the attention of the usurper from them. But every hour they lived in expectation of another visit from Captain Shimilin — and no news came that the American troops were moving up the railroad to give protection to the people.

Michael seemed to grow weaker as time passed. He fretted under the restraint of what was practically imprisonment. He worried constantly about the future for Katerin's sake. He devised many a scheme by which they were to escape from the city, only to abandon each one when Wassili returned from buying food in the market and reported that Zorogoff's soldiers were guarding every outlet from Chita.

Among other plans, Michael had thought of getting a droshky or a sledge and attempting a dash through fog or darkness, down the line of the railroad to the Manchurian border. He thought it might be possible to get

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into some Manchurian city, or to board a train bound toward Vladivostok at some point along the railroad which was outside the zone controlled by Zorogoff.

But while it might be possible to get through the cordons of Cossacks around the city, either by eluding them or bribing them, Michael knew that he might be betrayed before leaving the house at all. To carry out such a plan, it would be necessary to take a droshky driver into confidence, and though he might accept a large sum in payment, he might also betray Michael. For Zorogoff's spies were everywhere.

Then it was that Captain Shimilin returned to the house where the Kirsakoffs were concealed. His soldiers came pounding at the gate of the courtyard one day just before noon, and the Cossack captain once more faced Michael and Katerin in the room with the blue carpet, the silver samovar, and the battered candelabra.

Shimilin was frankly arrogant now, and he looked at Katerin with an air of bold assurance that, no matter what she might say, it would be of no avail to her. His pair of Mongol soldiers came with him, their eyes hungrier than ever for the things in the room. Katerin involuntarily pulled her sable coat closer about her when she saw the greedy gaze of the precious pair upon it. She had decided to be outwardly gracious as long as she could. But she was ready to stand out against the demands of the Ataman, as expressed by Shimilin, as long as she could, and then abide by the consequences.

Shimilin entered without a word, threw off his coat, and lighted a cigarette. It was plain that his course of action was settled, and that he knew perfectly what he would do from first to last. And his air indicated that he would stand no trifling.

Michael sat by the table. He had been playing at solitaire when Shimilin arrived, and the cards were still

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spread out on the board. Katerin had agreed with her father that she should handle the situation, for the old man might be trapped by Shimilin into saying something which would be used by the Cossack as an excuse for arresting the old general. Zorogoff had his own methods for giving a tinge of legitimacy to his unwarranted actions and justifying himself in the eyes of his soldiers. And Shimilin knew what Zorogoff demanded now.

"And what have you come for this time?" asked Katerin, as Shimilin continued to sit silently and smoke his cigarette.

"The Ataman will take no more excuses," said Shimilin. "I talked with him about you and your father, but he would heed neither me nor your protests that you have no money for him."

"You mean that the Ataman expects us to provide a fortune for him? And that having taken all we possess, you come back wanting more money?" demanded Katerin.

"That is what I have come for. I am sorry that I have to put you to the trouble, but ——"

"Perhaps if I should talk to Zorogoff," suggested Katerin.

"You can only talk to the Ataman with money," said Shimilin. He spoke without belligerency, almost apologetically, yet there was no doubt that he was completely in earnest.

"My answer to that — I am dumb," said Katerin. She sat down near her father, and folded her hands in an attitude of helpless resignation.

"You know of some of the things that have happened here since the Ataman began to rule," replied Shimilin.

"I can tell you that the dumb have been made to speak for Zorogoff. This is a matter that you would do well to consider with great care."

Michael picked up one of the cards before him, and re-

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sumed his game, as if what was being said held no interest for him.

Katerin leaned forward from the bench and looked into the black eyes of the Cossack.

"This is a matter that I have considered," she said slowly. "I have given thought to it much longer than you suppose — and I have considered that you, who are a Cossack, might even kill Russians by order of a Mongol chief. I am wondering if you have thought of that, Captain Shimilin, and ——"

Shimilin sprang to his feet, his face flushed and his eyes menacing.

"Take care what you say about the Ataman!"

Katerin smiled.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I also understand what you seek. It is to have it to say that we insult the Ataman. If calling him a Mongol is an insult, that is his affair — we only speak the truth, and if the truth be against him as he sees it and he resents it, we have nothing to do with that. I am not making little of him for his blood or his race. There have been many great men among his people, and he is of royal line. But it is to you, Captain Shimilin, that I am speaking. My father and I have always been friends of the Cossacks. Now you put a Mongol into power here. Do you expect him to give you what we Russians have always given you? The rank of free men? Even our Czar was Ataman of all the Cossacks. Have you not learned to rule in your own way?"

As Katerin went on, her confidence grew. She saw that there was shame as well as anger in Shimilin.

"We Cossacks held up the throne on the ends of our lances," said Shimilin doggedly. "We have our own master now, and we ask no advice from you or your father."

"Your own master?" asked Katerin with gentle irony. "If you are your own masters — why not a Cossack?"

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"This is our country, and we shall rule it as we wish."

"As you wish now? And how long before the Mongol will be ready to dispense with Cossack lances and turn your country, as you call it now, over to those who are closer to him in blood?"

"You forget," raged Shimilin, "that the Ataman protects you — and that you must give him help with money, as there is none in your family who can aid him with a sword!"

"Tribute or death!" cried Katerin. "Is that protection? And if a Russian cannot pay, the Mongol gets a Cossack to kill us! Do you think that if I could wear a sword I would take service under Zorogoff at those terms — and help to destroy my own race?"

"Your father ruled here with the help of Cossacks," retorted Shimilin. "We paid for the bread of majesty with our lives and our service — and killing Russians is no new business for us — eh, Michael Kirsakoff? How of that, old one? Did we not get well schooled in killing Russians in your time?"

"True!" cried Michael, turning to look at Shimilin. "But you were in the service of Russians. Think well of that. And those you killed broke the law, or had killed in their own turn, with their hand lifted against their fellow Russians or against the throne. The law is the law and justice is justice. Men are not all just, as we were not always just. But what law have we broken here in this house against your Ataman, that you should threaten us because we have no fortune?"

Shimilin gave no reply.

"Do you see no difference between the Czar and a Mongol princeling?" asked Katerin.

Shimilin turned to his soldiers. "Wait outside for me," he commanded with a gesture of dismissal. "I will call you when you are needed."

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The two men with rifles went outside and closed the door behind them.

Shimilin sat down again in an effort to compose himself. "I did not wish my men to hear the Ataman insulted," he began. "I have come here by order of Zorogoff to take your money — all of it. It is only to be a loan and you will lose nothing in the end. This is my advice — give your money to me. I will promise you safety."

He was frankly conciliatory. It appeared that he wished to cover his chagrin over what Katerin and her father had said and to put himself in a better light with them by a tacit agreement with them that he had no stomach for the business.

"And if we had money and we gave it," said Katerin, "how do we know that we would not be destroyed to hide the debt, as has happened to others?"

"Then it is that you do not trust Zorogoff," said Shimilin.

Katerin laughed lightly. "Those who have trusted him are dead. He has taken fortunes before — and then the firing squad. What need has he to destroy us? We should be safe because we are poor."

Shimilin glanced at the door. He leaned forward and whispered, "Then trust me. Turn over your money to me — and I promise safety. On my word as a Cossack! Come!"

Michael turned quickly and looked at Shimilin in surprise, but Katerin gave her father a glance of caution. She suspected that Shimilin was trying to trap them.

"You must trust us, Captain Shimilin. We have no fortune for Zorogoff or any other man."

Shimilin scowled in disappointment, and seemed to have more to say, but evidently thought better of it.

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"You will have a glass of tea with us," said Michael. "My house is poor, but no man goes from it without ——"

"No!" shouted Shimilin. "I will not have it from you. You do not trust me!" and he stepped to the door and flung it open. The two soldiers came back into the room.

"Kirsakoff, you must go with these men," said Shimilin.

"What!" cried Michael. "I am to go? Where am I to go?"

"Before the Ataman. It is his orders," said Shimilin quietly, and folded his arms.

"Does this mean that my father has been arrested?" gasped Katerin, staring in horror at the Cossack.

"Call it what you like," grunted Shimilin.

"But arrested for what? For being poor? You mean that my father is to be taken away by soldiers and no charge is made against him?" pressed Katerin, now aware that disaster had come.

"Get ready to go, and say no more, Kirsakoff," said Shimilin. "I shall stay here with your daughter."

"But I shall go with my father," insisted Katerin, doing her best to conceal the agony which possessed her. She knew that if her father were taken she might never see him again. "Please! I shall go with my father! Surely, there can be nothing against my going."

"Have no fear," said Shimilin. "Zorogoff wishes to talk with your father, that is all. No harm will come to him. And I shall see that no harm comes to you here while we wait. It will be better for you, and easier for your father if you do not make any trouble about it. You will only have to submit in the end."

"I shall go," said Michael, rising unsteadily to his feet. "I have no wish to oppose the Ataman if he desires to talk with me. Come, my daughter — fetch me

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my coat and my cap. The sooner this is over, the sooner we shall know what the Ataman expects of me."

Katerin hesitated, scanning the face of Shimilin as if hunting out some secret motive behind the taking of her father from her. Then with sudden resolution she went and brought her father's cap and coat from his room, and put them on him with loving care. When she had pulled the fur cap down about the old general's ears, she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him, her heart torn with anguish at the parting, but determined not to give way to her fears and doubts before him.

"God go with you and may you return to me soon," she said. "And do not worry for me, my father." She smiled at him.

"And God be with you, Katerin Stephanovna, the brave one," said Michael. Then turning to Shimilin, he said, "I am ready to obey your commands and I submit myself to your soldiers."

"Take Michael Kirsakoff to the Ataman," said Shimilin to his men, and they fell in on each side of Michael. Between the two, Michael marched across the room, doing his best to keep his weak old legs from betraying the unsteadiness of his age. At the door he crossed himself twice, and turning back, said to Katerin, "Hope is mightier than fear — remember that you are the daughter of a soldier and that we do not fear death, but only the loss of honor. Think not of me, but of yourself, and God's blessing and mercy upon you."

He turned and was gone, leaving Katerin standing with folded arms staring at the open door through which he had passed. Her face was white, her lips drawn tightly together. She remained thus, listening to the footfalls of her father and of the soldiers going down the stairs. When she could hear them no more, Wassili came up and peered in at the door, his eyes full of terror, and by his

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look silently questioning the truth of the scene he had just witnessed below.

"See that the doors are properly closed, Wassili," said Katerin, and the *moujik* went below again. She walked to a bench and sat down facing the stove, partly turned away from Shimilin who stood in the center of the room. She ignored his presence, but sat watching the flames dancing inside the stove behind the iron door, her hands gripped together in her lap.

Shimilin walked to the window and smoothed away the frost to look into the courtyard and the street. Soon he turned from the window and looked at Katerin.

"You may as well tell me where the money may be found," he said. "There is nothing to be gained by keeping it — and much to lose. I gave you your chance, but you preferred to trust Zorogoff. You would not give it to me — Zorogoff will take it. Where is the money to be found?"

"Where?" she asked, speaking as if in a dream, and not looking at him. "Where is the money to be found? That is a question."

"I do not enjoy this business," said Shimilin, cajolery in his voice. "If you would trust me ——"

"I trust only in God," she said. "We trusted the Cossacks and they have turned against us. We are in your hands."

Shimilin walked across the room, passing behind Katerin, and drew a glass of water from the samovar and poured into it some tea from the pot on the top of the samovar. He stood examining the things on the table, drinking the hot tea noisily.

There came the sharp crack of a board being broken in the courtyard below. Katerin turned her head in an attitude of listening, startled by the noise, and conscious that its meaning might hold some import of terrible sig-

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nificance. She had supposed that her father had gone from the house with the soldiers. She stood up to go to the window.

Shimilin stepped quickly in her way. "You are not to look out," he said calmly. "All that you are to do is to tell me where the money may be found. Why do you make all this trouble about it? I tell you it is bad. You could be happy and gay if you would trust me."

"Perhaps you will have another glass of tea," suggested Katerin. She returned to the bench and sat down to mask her worry over the noise she had heard in the court.

"Do you wish to see your father again?" asked Shimilin.

Katerin looked at him, unable to conceal the swift terror which struck at her heart with the Cossack's words. He returned her look with steady eyes.

"I wish to see my father again, if it be God's will," she said.

"Zorogoff is God," said Shimilin.

She gave no reply.

"I warn you — you must submit to Zorogoff's will."

Still she gave no answer. The frost from the upper part of the window had melted away in the heat of the room, and the ridge of ice across the bottom of the panes was dripping water to the floor, like the ticking of a clock.

Katerin turned to the fire again. Her face was drawn as if she were crying but her eyes were free from tears and she made no sound.

There came the sound of dull thuds from the courtyard. Something was striking frozen ground with regular blows, and soon could be heard the sharp rasping of metal on stone.

Katerin moved as if she would get up to look out of the

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window, but seeing Shimilin standing in front of her as if he intended to block the way, she sank back on the bench. Her terror grew as she began to understand the meaning of the sounds outside.

"What is that?" she whispered to Shimilin. "Tell me! What is happening?"

"Come and see for yourself," said Shimilin, and moved aside so that she might pass to the window.

She got up and started to cross so that she might look out. But she had not gone half the distance, when she stopped at hearing Wassili screaming below stairs.

"Mistress! Mistress! The soldiers are ——"

But Wassili's cries were checked. There were sounds of a scuffle, followed by harsh warnings from soldiers that the *moujik* must be still.

Katerin ran to the window. As she looked below, she gave a gurgling cry as if she had been struck in the mouth, and put her hands up to her face to shut out the sight of what she saw. For below in the courtyard her father was working with a shovel and throwing up broken, frozen, brown earth. A soldier was breaking the ground with a pick. And about the workers stood a large group of soldiers with their rifles, watching Kirsakoff dig a grave!

Katerin backed away from the window, sobbing, and threw herself upon a bench.

"You submit to Zorogoff or you die — both of you!" said Shimilin. "There is yet time to save your father."

Katerin stood up and faced Shimilin.

"You have betrayed us!" she cried. "There is no truth in you, you are not worthy of trust! Death is better than life where there is no honor, no truth, no faith in any man!" She turned her back upon the Cossack, and held out her arms to the icon of the Virgin

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Mother. "Mercy on the soul that goes to greet you — mercy, mercy, oh Mother of God!"

A whistle broke shrilly on the cold air outside. Shimilin leaped at Katerin, and grasping her by the shoulders, swung her round and thrust her at the window.

"Look!" he commanded. "If you can be so stubborn! Look, and see if you still wish to disobey the orders of the Ataman!"

Katerin saw her father standing with his back to the old wall of the court and six soldiers before him with their rifles upraised and aimed at the old general.

She fell back against Shimilin, half fainting, but recovering herself, staggered away from the window and fell upon her knees, her head bent toward the icon, moaning prayers.

"Your father can be saved," warned Shimilin. "Would you send him to execution? Tell me where the money is hidden — or when I lift my hand to the window, the soldiers will fire!"

"We are ready for death. I commend my soul and the soul of my father to God! Better death than life under the cruelty of a Mongol and the treachery of our Cossacks!"

"You will not trust me," said Shimilin. "I could save you both. Fools! I am ready to risk my own life to save you, yet you will not believe!" He raised his hand to the window.

IV

THE PLACE OF THE VOW

A NEW conductor boarded the train in the night. He was a big fellow, with a body round as a bear's and covered with many coats. He wore a big sheepskin cap, and carried a smoking lantern which was made of tin and was square, with a red circular glass in one side, a blue one in the other, and white ones on opposite sides. He held the lantern aloft and studied the sleepers on the shelves, making rainbows in the dim light of the car as he turned his prismatic lantern.

Snicking the ice from his whiskers, he waited till the train moved out again, when he promptly lay down in the passage between the sleeping-shelves and began snoring into the red light of the lantern on the floor beside him.

Lieutenant Peter Gordon, who was on a lower shelf, was awake with the first glimmer of gray light through the frosted windows. And as he looked out upon the floor of the car, he was startled by the sanguinary face of the new conductor in the red glow of the lantern as it rattled with the jolting of the car. Peter studied the queer figure prone on the floor, and observed the booted feet stretched out toward the cold stove in the corner.

Before long the conductor sat up, rubbed his eyes and yawned a chasm of a yawn. He dug into his clothing with a burrowing motion of his arm and brought forth through many strata of coats a watch fit for a giant. He put it to his ear, tilting his great cap to one side, and listened to the ticking. Then he squinted at it in the red light, and having assured himself that the new day had arrived on time, he buried the watch somewhere in Pliocene

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recesses and hove himself to his feet and attempted to look out of the window.

There was a remnant of candle stuck to the dirty window-sill by its own frozen cataract of tallow. The conductor fumbled for a match, struck it, and lighted the candle. The heat from its flame began to melt a widening oval in the frost. The jumping flame revealed more of the interior of the car — rifles hanging to the walls and rattling against the boarding with every lurch of the train, shoes hung on nails, garments swinging from the upper shelves, bare feet sticking out from blankets, outlandish bundles tied with bits of rope and twisted cloths, cartridge belts toothed with the brass tops of cartridges. And above the complaints of the laboring train could be heard the snores and sleep-mutterings of the Czech soldiers — men of an improvised army which had fought its way across Siberia and was now on the back trail to fight again that their comrades might be saved from annihilation by treacherous enemies.

The conductor studied the frozen wilderness through the window. Having satisfied himself with the landscape, he stared at the cold stove. He took the big ax which braced the door of the car shut and attacked a chunk of wood on the floor with crashing blows. With the splinters split off he started a fire and dumped in slabs of Manchurian coal, which crackled like a line of musketry and threw out into the car ribbons of yellow stifling smoke.

All the sleepers began to cough as the smoke penetrated the car. Soon there was a chattering and a rattling of mess gear, and some one at the other end of the car started the other stove — and a counter smoke-screen against the conductor's. Another day had begun in the filthy rabbit-hutch of a car. And the gallant Czechs, content to endure their Valley Forge of Siberia, chanted the songs of their homeland.

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Peter threw off his blankets and sat up. The conductor smiled at him and reached Peter's boots up to him from the floor.

"The fire will make it warm soon," he said, not knowing that Peter was an American officer and not supposed to understand or speak Russian.

"How soon will we get to Chita, my friend?" asked Peter.

"To Chita? Oh, soon."

"And how soon?"

"Perhaps half an hour. But you are going to Omsk?"

"Only to Irkutsk," said Peter. He broke the ice in his canvas bucket and washed his face, while the conductor looked on awe-struck at any person who could be so mad as to wash in ice water. He scanned Peter's tunic, which hung from the shelf.

"Are you Czech?" he asked finally.

"No, I am an American — an officer."

The conductor opened his mouth wide and crossed himself with both hands

"But you speak Russian," he said. "It is not right that you should speak Russian like a Russian and be an American!"

"I am really Russian," said Peter. "But it is that I have been in America a long time. I came from Petersburg, and now I have come back to help Russia to be free. Do you know Chita well?"

"I? Yes, a little. My wife's cousin died there in the time of the pestilence. He was a fur-hunter, but he was a stingy. I am not sorry that he died. He ate much when he came to see us, and never had an extra kopeck for the children."

"Who is the governor of Chita now?"

The conductor gave a snort of disgust. "How could there be a governor in this time of freedom? That is the

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old way. But we are free men now, as good as anybody. Am I not as good as an officer?"

"Better," said Peter. "But there was a governor in the old days. Every place had a governor for the Czar. You know that as well as I, my friend."

"True, I know it. But what does it matter now? This is not the old time."

"There was a prison in Chita — or was there?"

"True, there was a prison. A big one on a hill. You shall see it in time as we come to the city. But it is empty now, and the devil may live in it for all I care."

"I have heard that there was a Colonel Governor in Chita with one eye. He lost the other in a fight with a tiger, but he killed the tiger."

"Poosh!" said the conductor. "That is somebody's vodka-story. I have been on the railroad from the time it began, and I never heard of any Colonel Governor who killed a tiger, or who had one eye. The last governor at Chita was named Kolessow, and he had a bad leg, not a bad eye. He ran away when the revolution came. Before that was Kirsakoff, and I can tell you Kirsakoff had both his eyes. I never saw him — and a good thing, too, or ——"

"There never was a governor here named Kirsakoff," said Peter.

"No!" cried the conductor. "You have been in foreign lands, but you know more than I about this, do you? I say that there was a governor — Michael Alexandrovitch, and a general!"

"Perhaps I am wrong after all. Forgive me. But I had forgotten, because Kirsakoff went to Odessa."

"Perhaps he did. I don't know," said the conductor. "Are you looking for him?"

"Oh, no," said Peter. "I am looking for my brother. All I know is that my brother was in a place where a

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Colonel Governor with one eye lived — the fellow who had a fight with a tiger. But it was not Kirsakoff, surely.”

“No,” said the conductor. “It could not be he. So you have lost your brother? It is always the same story. Since we got freedom everybody is lost. I have not had my pay for six months, and I have seven children living and my wife is sick. My children cannot eat freedom, but it is the capitalists who are keeping us poor. In the old days I had a cow. And now the Americans have come. It is said that they want to steal our railroad and take our work away from us.”

“That is a lie,” said Peter. “The Americans are your friends.”

“What kind of friend comes to steal your work? I don’t know anything about politics, but my children have nothing to eat but cabbage. I know that, and they know it. I think it was better with the Czar. These fellows who come and talk politics — they are smart men — and good men. They gave us a lot of rubles. But with freedom it costs a hundred rubles for a loaf of bread, and I get no pay. And those fellows who talked politics ate my cow, and nobody wants the rubles they gave me. What kind of business is that? Not to take rubles after my cow has been eaten!”

Peter shook his head, helpless for an answer, and finished his dressing. He went out on the platform between cars. The cold air assailed him witheringly, for it was more than sixty degrees below zero that morning. He pulled the fur strap of his cap across his nose and leaned out from the car steps to scan the snow-streaked plain.

In the distance were low hills covered with sparse fringes of pines and larches. At the base of the hills, huddled against them like a flock of sheep seeking shelter, were primitive huts of the aboriginal Buriats, and stray Mongol herdsmen in winter quarters.

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The train made a detour on temporary trackage to get round the wreck of a bridge that had been blown up. The little river was frozen and peasants were cutting a hole in the ice to get water for a pair of scraggly little Siberian ponies with coats of long frost-covered hair and icicles hanging from their nostrils. The men stopped to watch the train go past, and flailed their bodies with their arms to keep warmth in their blood.

Once more the slowly moving train changed direction and drew near to low hills ahead, their crests serrated by timber and their sides slashed with snow which was held in the frozen water courses. As it rounded these hills and ran in through a low pass, a city of bizarre appearance was unmasked. It lay in a great cup between hills — in a wide valley, level as a plain.

At first sight the city looked more like the smoldering ruin of a vast settlement that had recently been destroyed by fire. Rising from a sea of small huts was what appeared to be a forest of gigantic white fungi — columns of ivory smoking from the tops, or some poisonous growths like giant toadstools, or a land filled with tiny craters from which rose gray fumes that spread high in air into motionless clouds. These queer pillars were nothing but smoke rising from the buildings of the city and the warm air from chimneys rising straight up in the still, frigid air.

Through the pillars of steam and smoke could be seen taller buildings, and here and there minaretlike spires lifted out of the ruck, and catching the morning sun, reflected the light with tints of gold and bluish green. And there were great blue domes marking the synagogue, while a cross and a crescent glinted with gilt from the top of a Moslem mosque. The old exile settlement of Chita — the Valley of Despair — had grown to a city and filled the plain.

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On the slopes of the hill above, Peter saw a great yellowish stockade built of upright logs which enclosed low, rambling buildings. The sun flashed from tiny windows which were smaller than the gun ports of a frigate, or where the tiny windows were broken there were black holes like eye sockets in a skull. Many stubby chimneys built of stone gave the low buildings the appearance of castellated walls. But no smoke issued from the chimneys.

In contrast with the smoking city below, the place of the stockade seemed to be deserted. The scant snow all about it was unbroken by any path, showing that if there was a road leading to the stockade, it was not in use. The yellow color of the walls suggested an unhealthiness — a place shut away from the population of the city. The lines of the place were clearly etched upon the slope like the skeleton of some monstrous animal which had died upon the dreary and deserted hillside. And it was a dead thing — the wreck of the old prison of the Valley of Despair.

The train puffed into the station. The platform was thronged with a surging mob of people making a mad clamor to get into the cars filled with soldiers. They pleaded to be allowed to ride to any place, but there was no room for them in the stifling train and the Czechs refused to allow the refugees aboard. So they gathered up their pitiful belongings and swarmed back into the station out of the cold to wait for other trains which might take them away.

Peter gathered up his blanket-roll and his bag and slipped out of the car. He got a porter at the station, a big *moujik* in a dirty white apron, to take the things to a *droshky* in the square.

Once free of the mob, and with the station between him and the train, Peter looked across the square. Some soldiers were drilling in the open place — short chaps, of

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heavy build and awkward movements, learning to march and countermarch under the commands of Cossack officers.

There were many brick buildings of three and four stories. But between them were the low, squat log houses of old times, battered and unkempt, run-down pioneers now relegated to the position of poor relations and long neglected.

Peasant women trotted round and round their crude carts, selling blocks of frozen soup and loaves of black bread to refugees from the station. The cold air was laden with sour odors. There was a great gabbling between buyers and sellers. The women and men kept running round in circles for warmth, their breath bearding them with steam from their nostrils. To the half-clad and hungry, merely keeping alive in such cold was an agony.

A group of boys with tattered newspapers gathered about Peter, noting his furs and his brown field-boots with curious eyes. These boys were wrapped with long woolen scarfs, and wore uncouth clothes and men's boots long since thrown away by the original owners — boots lacking soles except for rags bound round the feet. If the lads stood still for but a minute, it was to shiver violently, so they kept jumping up and down like marionettes moved by a string. Peter's eyes filled with tears at the sight of them, and he threw them a handful of paper rubles and kopecks that they might have hot cabbage soup.

"Poor little chaps!" he said, and, getting into a droshky, told the *iswostchik* to drive to the best hotel. The horses broke into a gallop at once, straight across the square, and it was then that Peter noticed an ancient building in the line of the street ahead. It was built of logs in the old style.

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"Is that the old post-house?" he shouted to the driver.

"Yes, that is it," said the driver.

"Then stop! In front of the post-house!" cried Peter, slapping the driver on the back with a lusty thump. "Turn, please — and stop!"

"But it is a restaurant now," said the driver. He seemed bewildered, but he swung his horses into the street before the old building and brought them up abruptly, muttering in his whiskers.

"You said to go to a hotel, and this is a restaurant," he complained. "How am I to know what you want, when you say two different things to me about where you want to go?"

"I wish to stop here but a minute," said Peter. He jumped out of the droshky, and, standing in the street, looked up and down its length, and turned to survey the old post-house. Sure enough, the sign over it said it was a restaurant, and through the tops of the partly clear windows he could see the gaudy colors of curtains hanging within.

"The Sofistkaya!" whispered Peter. "I would never have known it." He studied the square, the big white station, and the buildings of the street. He walked through the loose sand to a spot directly in front of the door of the old post-house, but well out from it, and crossed himself twice with both hands in the old way.

He looked down at the sand and dirty snow.

"Blood of my father!" he whispered. "I have come back to keep the vow! I pray that I am not too late — that Kirsakoff still lives!"

He stood there a few minutes, the tears streaming down his cheeks and freezing on the flesh. He uttered prayers, and then strode back to the droshky, entered it, and was once more rolling up the Sofistkaya.

V

THE ATAMAN'S DECISION

WHEN Captain Shimilin raised his hand to the window, there was a sharp command in the courtyard below, followed by the crash of a volley from the rifles of the soldiers Katerin had seen standing before her father.

Katerin, kneeling in front of the icon, fell forward upon the floor at the sound of the volley. Shimilin, still at the window, stood gazing across the room at her, a puzzled look upon his face, as if he did not know what to do next. He heard Wassili wailing in the kitchen below, and from the court came the sounds of metal being thrust into flinty soil and laughter and joking comments from soldiers.

Katerin lay still for several minutes. Then she sat up, and stared at Shimilin as if she had just been awakened from a dream and was still in doubt about her surroundings and why she should be there.

"It is finished," said Shimilin. "Your father is dead. I am sorry for you, but the Ataman must be obeyed. If you will give up the money now, I will protect you."

She did not answer him, but continued to stare at him, attempting to grasp what had happened.

"You have killed my father!" she whispered, putting her hands up to her cheeks. "You have killed my father! And now you want me to pay you for it!"

"It is Zorogoff who has killed your father," said Shimilin. "I obey his orders — as you must."

He walked over to Katerin and held out his hand to

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help her to her feet. But she evaded him, and stood up.

"You are a murdering dog," she said quietly, hatred and revulsion in her look as she shrank away from him. "You lied to us — and you lie now! You are no better than the Mongol — worse than Zorogoff, for he would not kill his own kind for you!"

"Take care!" he warned, moving toward her threateningly. "Take care! My soldiers are still below."

She cried out with rage against him, and sprang at him and struck him in the face with her open hand. Then she threw up her arm and whirled away from him, to run behind the screen of her bed as if to get a weapon. But Shimilin grasped her by the shoulders and pulled her back into the center of the room. She tore away from him.

"Kill me!" she cried. "There is nothing left in life for me now. Kill me, too!"

"No, I will not kill you," said Shimilin suavely. "We do not kill women like you too soon, Katerin Stepanovna."

"You are swine!" she raged. "You told us my father was to go to the Ataman. Talk to me no more, but kill me here!"

Shimilin said nothing, but stood looking at her with every sign of being on the verge of complying with her command. But he did not put hand to pistol. Instead, he shrugged his shoulders and smiled, went to the bed behind the screen and pulled off a blanket. He threw it to her but she let it fall upon the floor.

"Take the blanket," he said gruffly. "You may have death if you want it, but not by my hand. Take the blanket and come with me to the soldiers below."

Katerin kicked the blanket aside.

"I do not fear the cold any more than I fear death," she said quietly, and moved to the door. "Come! I will show you how a Russian woman can die!"

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Shimilin followed her down the stairs to the hall below. The old woman in the kitchen who did the cooking was crying in a room beyond the kitchen, out of sight. Katerin felt impelled to call a farewell to the old woman, and to Wassili, but she refrained because she suspected that the two servants might protest to the soldiers and draw ill treatment and probably death.

So she passed down the hall and out through the double doors into the courtyard. The place was full of soldiers, and her eyes lit at once upon a pile of fresh, brown earth near the wagon-shed. That, she knew, was her father's grave. She walked straight to the mound, and stopping beside it, turned and faced the soldiers.

The heavily clad men stood about with their rifles, looking like great beetles, their heads topped with big caps, their faces wrapped in fur or rags, their bodies rotund with many garments, and the breath from their nostrils making what might have been inverted white horns as the air they breathed out turned to steam and spurted out from their faces behind the straps over their noses. They were not in ranks, these men, but gathered in groups as if waiting for some one to tell them what they should do next.

Captain Shimilin followed Katerin halfway across the yard, where he stopped to speak to a tall soldier in a long coat. The pair talked together quietly, looking at Katerin. Shimilin carried a towel which he had snatched up as he had passed out of the hall. He whipped the towel against his coat while he talked with the other soldier, and it was plain that the Cossack was in bad humor.

Katerin glanced at the spade and the old pickax which had been cast aside from the mound of earth. She lifted her eyes to the upper windows of the house. Then she threw open her sable coat, revealing the dull crimson of her velvet gown and the white of her throat. Gray and

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white and crimson, she made a striking picture against the dull background of the old buildings. The morning breeze which whipped in gustily over the courtyard wall and rattled the dead vines along its top, lifted wisps of her hair about her ears. The cold tortured her, but she gave no indication of her suffering. She looked like a beautiful flower which had grown in a drab garden now infested by wild things which had broken in for destruction and hated all things beautiful.

She let her hands fall to her sides. The cold was numbing her.

"I am ready!" she called to Captain Shimilin.

The Cossack moved to her, and held out the towel. "I shall cover your eyes so that you shall not see the rifles," he said.

"Please do not touch me," she begged. "It is all I ask. Let them shoot!"

The soldier who had been talking to Shimilin walked up to Katerin and peered into her face. His features were concealed by a strap of fur. Katerin knew by his manner that he must be an officer, though he wore no insignia. After a casual glance at him, she looked beyond him and fixed her gaze upon the house.

"Do you understand that you can save your life if you will follow the advice of Captain Shimilin?" asked the stranger.

"I do not seek the advice of Captain Shimilin — nor any other person," said Katerin.

"You prefer to die?"

"I have done with life."

"You talk like a brave woman," went on the stranger.

"Oh, be done! I am cold!" said Katerin. She noted that a group of soldiers had fallen into line before her, and that the others about the yard gathered closer, regarding her with curious eyes.

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The tall officer drew apart again with Shimilin, and they carried on a low conversation once more. The men in line began to examine their rifles to be in readiness. Both Shimilin and the other officer returned and stood before her again.

"Because your father, General Kirsakoff, was Governor here in the old days, is no reason why you should expect to oppose the new ruler," said the officer.

Katerin did not answer.

The officer threw open his long coat, showing a uniform of gray tunic and blue breeches. He pulled the strap from his face and revealed the dark face of a Mongol. Sparse mustaches fell from the ends of his upper lip, clinging to his jowls as they drooped past the side of his mouth. His black eyes were set in close to a wide flat nose. Yet his face had a proud and serious mien — the face of an Asiatic of high degree, the face of a stoical and cruel man.

"I am the Ataman Zorogoff," he said. "I rule. Your father would not loan his fortune to my government. That is all I ask of you. I give you your choice — submit or die."

Katerin looked at him scornfully.

"I am nobody," she said. "I submit only to God and the saints of heaven. I do not recognize your right to rule, even though you take my life. Tell your brave soldiers to shoot."

Zorogoff laughed harshly.

"You have the spirit of the devil, mistress."

"Speak of the devil and we see his tail," retorted Katerin, using an old Russian proverb.

"You are a brave woman," repeated Zorogoff. "You have the blood of good ancestors — a fighting, ruling breed — as were mine."

"My ancestors have never feared death."

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"Do you know that I am a prince in Mongolia?" asked Zorogoff tartly. He seemed nettled by Katerin's way of looking at him, rather than by her scornful words.

"I do not doubt it, sir. And you belong there."

"Ah! Is that true? Though your father is governor no longer, you still tell people where they belong. My people ruled this land before your people came, and once more we shall rule. But if you will give up your money to the government, in time you shall have it back. My soldiers need food and clothing. What is your answer, mistress?"

A tremor of cold shook Katerin's body. The air was stifling her, and she was chilled till she no longer felt pain.

"Death!" she answered through quivering lips.

Zorogoff turned to Shimilin.

"The better the horse the worse his bite," said the Ataman. "But once he is broken, you have a good horse. I do not want to kill a woman so brave as this one." Turning to Katerin, he went on, "Your sons would know how to rule, mistress."

"I leave no sons," she said, now too chilled to care or perceive what the Ataman's meaning might be.

"I was thinking of what your sons might be like," went on Zorogoff. "Do not be too sure about sons."

Katerin gave a cry of agony. She knew now what Zorogoff meant — and she feared now that she might not die after all. She looked at Zorogoff, as he stood before her, peering into her face.

"Kill me!" she cried, and then realizing that unless she angered him by insults, he might not give the order to the soldiers, she spoke with infinite loathing, loud enough so that the soldiers might hear. "You are a lowborn dog! Your mother was a scullion and your father a mover of dead bodies! You are neither Cossack nor

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Mongol, but vermin from mud huts and a disgrace to both white and yellow!"

"Ah!" said Zorogoff. "Now I know that there is fear in you, and fear for what, my lady! You prefer the rifles to a palace. What if I should give you the fate you dislike?"

"Go to the market place for your women, you swine!" cried Katerin.

The Ataman stepped aside and beckoned Shimilin after him. "Let us see how brave she is," whispered Zorogoff, and he made a gesture to the men with the rifles. The muzzles lifted promptly and the men took aim at Katerin.

"I will show you who rules now," called Zorogoff.

"And I will show you how a woman of the nobility can die, lowborn one!"

"Fire!" commanded Zorogoff, throwing up an arm in a gesture of command.

But the rifles did not speak, though they remained leveled at Katerin. She began a prayer, gazing steadily into the muzzles which faced her, and waiting for the impact of the bullets.

Seconds passed. They became minutes. Katerin closed her eyes against the cold. After a wait she opened her eyes again and eight rifles still pointed straight at her.

"Shoot!" she pleaded. "Please shoot!"

She closed her eyes once more. The minutes passed, and Katerin's body wavered, swayed, and she collapsed in a faint across the fresh mound of earth.

"Take her up and carry her into the house," commanded the Ataman. "She is a brave woman—but stubborn. She shall submit."

The soldiers picked Katerin up and carried her through the hall to the kitchen. Wassili and the old serving

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woman began to scream, thinking that their mistress had been killed.

Zorogoff and Shimilin walked out of the yard and into the street. Shimilin whistled on his fingers. Soon the troika of the Ataman swung out of a side street and the horses came galloping up. There were three men in the troika — two soldiers — and Michael.

“Where is my daughter?” demanded the old general. “What have you done with her? Does she still live?”

“You will find her inside the house,” said Shimilin. “She is not dead.”

“God is good,” said Michael, at once careful of his words.

“Go back to your house,” said Zorogoff, “and wait till I return.”

“So?” asked Michael. “And why do you return?”

“You shall know then. There has been too much talk to-day.”

Michael got out of the troika and the Ataman got in with Shimilin. Already the soldiers were marching out from the yard, and swinging back into the city.

“Take care that you do not leave the house,” warned Zorogoff, as Michael stood waiting for the soldiers to be clear of the gate. “I do not wish to have you and your daughter run the danger of being fired upon by the sentries. I wish you both to live as long as God lets you.”

Michael, afraid that there was still a trap and that the Ataman had no intention of leaving, though he had been covered by the robes in the troika and had swathed his face and head in furs, did not dare turn his back upon the precious pair in the vehicle.

“I thank you for your consideration,” said the old general. “I thought I was to die, but I still live and my daughter is safe.”

Zorogoff leaned out and spoke earnestly. “If the cat

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wants a fish, let her wet her feet," he said. And then added with taunting irony, "You are proud of your rank and your race, Michael Alexandrovitch — you and your daughter hold yourselves superior to a Mongol who is of the blood of rulers, and who rules. But I, too, have pride. You should know more of me and mine, and to that purpose you and your daughter shall live in my palace. I go to prepare for you, and you shall both live under my roof."

"What?" cried Michael. "That is a new string to the fiddle! Why should we live in your palace?"

"So that I may take care of your health, Michael. And I shall need your advice in government."

"My advice in your government! You come with a firing squad to kill me and now you talk of taking me to your palace! Surely, this is a day of madness, and I do not understand!"

"You will in time," replied the Ataman. "You have a lesson to learn. It is that you must not hold yourselves superior to Mongol princes. For your grandchildren, Michael, are to be Mongols, and you and your daughter shall hold them in your arms. You both shall love them — though they be of Mongol blood."

Zorogoff spoke to the driver and the horses galloped away, leaving Michael cursing under his breath. Then he ran into the yard as fast as his cold-stiffened legs could carry him, and entered the house, calling for Katerin.

Wassili burst through the door of the kitchen into the hall, and cried out in terror at sight of the master whom he supposed to be dead. The *moujik* fell to his knees, crossing himself and making the sign to ward off devils.

"Katerin! Katerin!" shouted Michael, as he saw the form of his daughter stretched upon an old bench that had been turned into a couch. The old serving woman was giving her mistress restoratives and attempting to

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warm her — but she fled, screaming, as Michael entered.

Katerin opened her eyes and shivered violently. She stared at her father, who stood over her, and then closed her eyes again and began to cry. She supposed that she was delirious and that her father was not really there.

“Have they tortured you?” cried Michael. “Oh, Katerin Stephanovna, you are spared to me — and I live! Look, my daughter!”

He lifted her up from the bench and kissed her, crying to her again and again that he was not dead.

“Oh, God! Thou art good!” she moaned, and then she was swept by sobs of joy and fell back upon the bench.

Michael collapsed upon the floor, and when Wassili and the old woman overcame their fears and entered the kitchen again they found father and daughter crying quietly and clinging to each other consolingly.

VI

THE PRISON ON THE HILL

PETER did not stop at the Hotel Dauria to see the room which a sleepy-eyed youth said might be had. There was a red-hot stove in the entrance-hall, a dirty stairway leading to an upper floor, a pair of stuffed bears standing among pots of rubber plants, and a few old benches on which in better days the droshky-drivers, the fur-hunters and the gossips of the city gathered of nights. The front windows were boarded up and the place still bore signs of the work of looters — leather hinges on the double doors, wall-paper ripped off in great gashes which exposed the rough plaster, and here and there the mark of a bayonet point or the pock marks of wild bullets.

Peter simply dumped his baggage in the entrance-hallway and went out again to pay off the *iswostchik*. Where he went, Peter wanted no one watching, so he set out as if on a casual ramble through the almost deserted streets.

He knew the way to the old prison. It would be up the Sofistkaya and over the little bridge which spanned the frozen stream running through the city. But it was not the same old wooden bridge which Peter expected to find. It proved to be a sturdy arch of concrete, level and wide.

Some of the buildings near by had been half wrecked or burned. One big building was but a shell, a black ruin streaked with snow, with the windows out and the interior walls revealing old log pillars and a few crazy rafters. From a lower window there fluttered a bit of curtain, like a distress signal from an abandoned dere-

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lict. It was the old house of the governor — Kirsakoff.

Peter lingered and studied this building. There were few people in the streets, and they paid no attention to him, for in his furs there was little about him to mark him as a foreign officer, or a soldier at all, for that matter, because he wore his pistol under his outer coat in such way that he could reach it through a pocket.

Water-carts hauled by ponies passed, bringing water from the city wells. They were shrouded in ice. A few peasants were on their way to the station bazaar with bundles of vegetables or partridges. Chinese trotted about with packs on their backs, smugglers in sugar and tea, or traders in luxuries brought in by hand over the railroad — such luxuries as candles, buttons, cigarettes, and salt.

Peter went on till he could see above him on the hill the yellow walls of the old stockade. He mounted the slope, but headed as if to pass the prison far below, and walking as if he had no other intention than to wander up the hill and look back upon the city. He stopped at times, and looked behind him.

As he went up the slope he managed to draw in closer to the stockade. The old road had no tracks upon it, proof that the prison must be deserted. And, in fact, the city itself seemed to be deserted as he looked down into it from the upper land. Though smoke came from the chimneys, the people kept mostly indoors. There was an ominous hush in the air, as if the inhabitants were afraid to be seen. The forests gave off no sound of woodsmen or hunters. Away on the side of the plains toward Manchuria Peter could see groups of three and four horsemen on patrol. But the Valley of Despair seemed like a place in which a pestilence raged, so bare was it of living beings except around the station.

“The place is accursed!” said Peter, as he stood and

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gazed out over the valley and the city. "After America, I know now what this all means. And there is something which has brought me back. My father, can it be you? Can you know? Have you guided me so that justice may be done? I pray that Kirsakoff be still alive!"

And Peter did know the meaning of it all. Chita was a ghastly city built from the weeping of women and the curses of men doomed to chains and living deaths in dark cells. The very soil reeked with the blood of exiles.

And Peter Gordon, the American, was once more Peter Petrovitch Gorekin, the Russian. During the three weeks that he had been on the train from Vladivostok, he had become more Russian every day. He knew now that the Russians were not free, though the throne had been overturned. There was still work to do.

Peter went on, now straight for the entrance to the prison, where he found the heavy gate lying in the snow, torn from its iron hinges and covered with the dents of logs and rocks which had battered it down.

He entered the prison yard. There were broken tables and piles of half burned records among charred logs. The sentry platforms had been dragged down from the inner wall and made a clutter of wrecked timbers. The little windows gaped open and the iron bars across them had been bent outward. Fine, hard snow covered the wreckage like a powder, gathered here and there in the cracks of the stone walks and in the holes where the flat stones had been ripped out and overturned.

The place was without life. Yet it seemed to throb with life. Peter half expected to find people inside the long galleries of the prison buildings, though he knew that there could be no living person in such a place of horrors.

The door opening to the inner guardroom was also down, a thing of planks strapped together with iron bars. It lay askew across the stone threshold, and Peter walked

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over its side. It gave out a dull, hollow sound, which set the echoes going through the long inner galleries of the cell-wings. A vile odor assailed him as he stepped inside, and he shivered.

He knew this place well. There were broken desks here, and gun-racks on the walls had been ripped from their supports. It was here that he had been taken the morning after his father had been cut down by the Cossack before the post-house. And Peter saw again in his mind's eye the commandant with the gold bars on his shoulders, he heard again the careless questions snapped at him. Then he saw himself, a terrified little boy, led down the long gallery and thrust into a dark cell.

He pushed on now into the gallery with its battered cell doors lying half inside and half outside the cells, some swinging crazily on bent hinges, some partly burned and lying in bits of charred wood, others splintered and their fragments strewn along the stone-floored passage.

His feet made dull echoes. There was a sound of frightened things scampering into dark holes before him. And to Peter it seemed that there were thousands of men in the place — men who peered out at him derisively and gave long hooting laughs at him.

It was colder inside the prison than outside in the clean air — a dark, dank, penetrating cold combined with the sickly smell of an old cage in which frozen white shoots of growing vegetation killed and preserved by the cold glimmered uncannily in the rank air.

He found the cell that had been his — sixth on the right side. The big door was swung inward. The stone benches inside were black and polished with years of dirt and years of being sat upon. The stained log walls were covered with thousands of marks which recorded days and years spent in the cell by exiles. Among these rows of time-keeping scratches were also etched words of hate

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and messages of comfort and the scribbled jeers of men who had made a jest of going from such a place to the execution yard.

One line on the wall caught Peter's eye under the searching beam of his pocket flash light. "God curse Kirsakoff," Peter read. The letter had been formed by his own boyish fingers with a nail — fingers stiff with cold. He laughed at the sight of it now, and slapped the pistol on his hip under his greatcoat. His laugh came back to him multiplied a hundred times from the cells of the long galleries stretching away in the darkness. The echoes sounded like a scornful chorus from ghosts.

He sat down on the stone bench and looked at the dirty hole in the door through which food had been passed in to him — black bread and greasy soup made from the refuse of cabbages. He sat there several minutes, and threw his memory back to the days and nights which he had spent there buried alive, doubting at times that he existed till food was brought and the rats gathered round him, squeaking for their share.

Fear gripped him. He sprang up and ran, his boots making a clatter over the planks of the broken doors in the passage. He gained the prison yard and his whole body was laved in a sweat of agony. He got out into the open, and stopping an instant to scan the slopes below to see if he had been observed or followed, he turned away to the left to the fenced-in grove which was the old burial ground of the prison.

It was in there that his father had been buried, but Peter did not know where. A few rotten boards lay upon the ground; a few weather-beaten crosses scored and twisted out of shape, littered the ground. Peter stood with tears in his eyes and looked over the rough ground.

"Peter Petrovitch has come back, my father," he said. And crossing himself, he said a prayer. Then he turned

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and descended the slopes toward the city, bearing off to the right and trying to make it appear to any watcher that he had been wandering about aimlessly. The thought struck him that he had been unwise in going to the prison. It might lead to gossip, especially when it became known in the city that he was an American. Why should an American officer go prowling about the old prison of a city which ——

Peter checked his thoughts in that direction. It seemed strange that he should refer to himself as an American. America was now very far away, a dim vista in his memory, hard to realize, like an old dream faintly remembered. It seemed odd that America had receded so far into the background of his mind. For was he not a Russian? Yes, he knew that he was Russian to the core. His Americanism had never been anything but an outer shell, a readjustment to new conditions, a learning of new things, and a new life. But he had not changed — only the clothes upon his back. True, he thought, the clothes would serve a purpose. Who would ever suspect that an American officer had come to Chita to do what he hoped to do? Who would ever suspect that the American lieutenant, Peter Gordon, could be Peter Petrovitch Gorekin, the son of an unfortunate?

He entered the city again, this time far to the right of where he had gone up the slope, and rambled along the Sofistkaya till he came to the old post-house again — the restaurant. He went in, and found a few soldiers sitting about tables talking and playing games. He took a table to himself and when the gypsy girl came for his order, he called for vodka. He was chilled by his walk on the hill and his spirits were depressed by the prison. The liquor warmed him.

The restaurant was a dirty place. The old plank floors were spotted with mud where the ice-balls from the

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heels of patrons had melted, and the blackened log rafters were cobwebby and sooty. There was an ancient icon in the corner. The walls had been partly stripped of a moldy old paper so that the yellow plaster showed through the gashes. And here, as in the hotel, there were bullet craters.

Peter finished his glass of vodka and went out again. He hurried back toward the hotel, but he had not gone far when he espied in between two modern buildings and well back from the street, an old hut — an *isba* of the old days. He stopped in his tracks and stared at it. The building was not more than eight feet square, of single story, with a small window under the eaves. There was a rude chimney of stones at one end. A sign over the door told that cigarettes, matches, and holy cards were sold within.

Peter went in between the two buildings and pushed open the low and sagging door of the hut. There was an old man sitting on a bench under the window with a newspaper — a thin old hulk of a graybeard with a face shrouded in white whiskers that were stained yellow about his hidden mouth. He wore a tiny black skullcap on his head which brought out the bleached whiteness of his whiskers and the pallor of his crinkled forehead. His hands were tucked in the sleeves of his ragged old coat, and he huddled up toward the smoldering fire in the ancient fire-pit.

Startled by Peter's entrance, the old man thrust the newspaper behind him quickly. As he got to his feet he kicked the paper out of sight behind a box. He stood looking at Peter with questioning eyes, knowing that there was something strange about the visitor but not being able to tell what in the vague light coming through the frosted window.

"Do you sell cigarettes here?" asked Peter.

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"Yes, I sell cigarettes here," croaked the graybeard. "Is it that you have come for cigarettes to this poor place — you, who are dressed in odd clothes?"

"What else should I come for?" asked Peter pleasantly. "Do you think I have come to rob you?"

The old one appeared relieved, but he was still on his guard.

"We never know what a man comes for these days. And you are not a man of Chita, I can tell that."

"What does it matter where I came from, if I pay for what I take? Come! Let me see some cigarettes!"

The graybeard grunted and shuffled across the room to a shelf and took down some packets of tin covered with a faded paper.

Peter looked the room over. It was hard to believe that this tiny hut was the place in which he had worked with his father. In his memory it had taken on vaster proportions, yet in reality it was but a boxlike hovel. There was the same old adz-hewn plank bench well polished by years of use; the floor near the fire-pit had the very depressions worn into the wood by the legs of his father's stitching-frame. And the same stone in the chimney on which his father had whetted the leather-knives! By that fire-pit Peter had spent many nights studying out Russian letters and words in battered almanacs. The place still smelled of leather — or Peter fancied it did.

"Here are cigarettes of the best quality from Harbin, *gospodeen*," said the old man, proffering a long tin box. "I keep them for such as are of the upper class. I must pay grease to Chinese for bringing these cigarettes in, and if you buy, you will be back for more — and twenty rubles for the box."

Peter sat down on the bench and pretended to examine the packet of cigarettes. But he was really look-

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ing at the little battered samovar on the little wooden table. Beside the samovar was a blackened piece of tin which was used to transfer hot coals from the fire-pit to the samovar. And the rude shelves with their packages of "Moscow biscuits," matches, cigarettes, and holy cards for the holidays and the name days of children drew Peter's eyes. The stock in trade was smoke-blackened and fly-specked by countless summers and winters. And the room reeked with smoke, which made the old man's eyes red and watery.

Peter saw that the cigarettes were of the cheapest grade.

"Why do you double the price because I am a stranger?" asked Peter. "You know that half a ruble would buy these in the old days, and now with the money bad, ten is enough for them?"

"God protect us! You speak the Czar's Russian, though you wear a foreign coat! Have you come here to buy from me, or to find who is smuggling? There is no duty now, true, but I have to pay grease, as I said. I would say the same to the Ataman himself."

"But I know something about the price of cigarettes," said Peter. He was willing enough to pay the price but he knew that reluctance would draw the old man out, and that an argument would probably develop an acquaintance which might be useful.

"But the troubles have come and that makes the price high," whined the old man. "Am I to starve among my cigarettes? There are few enough to buy these days, I tell you."

"I will pay, but you are an old robber," said Peter, going into his pockets and fetching out two ten-ruble notes of Imperial money. The old man's eyes danced, for he knew Imperials to be worth twice again the new paper money on which his prices were based.

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"Did you come here for a *ruganie*?" demanded the old man, meaning a mutual slandering of each other in Russian in which both parties to the argument call names of an import so evil as to chill the marrows of respectable listeners. "And you! You look like a gentleman. From what place have you come?"

"From the place I go back to. Have you been in Chita long, little grandfather?"

"I?" asked the old man, stroking his whiskers. "Yes. What does it matter? I shall be here all time. See the hills outside? My bones shall build them higher," and he broke out into a cackling laugh as if the joke were one that he used often and still liked its flavor.

"You were here in the old days?" pressed Peter.

The old one gave Peter a keen look, and sat down on the end of the bench, hiding the precious ten-ruble notes away somewhere under his arms.

"I? Why not?"

"You were here when the prison was full of unfortunates?"

"I was here when it was emptied, too," and he laughed again and bent to poke the fire with an old cane. But he was getting cautious again, as if he suspected that there might be more behind the twenty rubles than he had bargained for.

"What happened when the prison was emptied? It must have been a joyful time."

Graybeard made a noise in his throat which might have been a chuckle, and turning from the fire stood up and straightened his back, to gaze frankly at Peter as if to ask why so many questions were being asked. It was plain that he disapproved of giving gossip extra with what he sold.

"You should have been here if you wanted to know," he said.

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"I suppose they killed the soldiers," went on Peter.

"No, the unfortunates did not kill the soldiers — except, perhaps, the bad soldiers who had been cruel. Were not the soldiers made free also by revolution? As well as the unfortunates?"

"True," assented Peter. "But the officers? Many of the officers were killed, eh?"

"The square down there by the station," and gray-beard threw out his arm and his eyes took on a reminiscent look, "the square is full of dead folks — old and young, officers and all, rich and poor, high and low, witches and holy men. But the unfortunates did not harm me. I am Rimsky and the friend of all, though many were drunk and did not know who were friends. But I got into a potato-cellar till the worst was over, though I was stiff in the legs a good month after. But I was out in time to see them all go off to Petersburg to kill the Little Father, the fools!"

"Would you have the Czar back? Is that what you mean?" asked Peter.

"I? Why do you ask me that? Is it not enough to know that in the old days there was peace — and that I would have peace in which to die. Should not a man have peace in which to meet the dead? That is all I ask you."

"But are not the new times better than the old?" asked Peter. "Would you have the old times back — and the prison on the hill full of people?"

Rimsky lighted the fragment of an old cigarette and smoked a minute before he replied, pulling at his whiskers.

"New times, new troubles," he said with tired voice. "We knew in the old times what to do to be happy, and likewise what not to do. It was all put down plain in the laws and the rules of the governors. Those who wanted better government did not know that bad gov-

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ernment is better than none. Now it is all fighting, and no man trusts another. But I am not afraid, for my life is behind me. Now, when the railroad came here, it was said that everybody would be rich and happy. Before then we had only the mail-sledges, with their bells and horses. The people were happy enough, but for these educated fools always talking about what should be done with government and getting themselves and poor people into trouble. Now what do we have? All night an accursed ringing of railroad bells and screeching whistles till a man wakes in his bed, thinking the devil is calling. And people and cows get killed by the railroad — and mad soldiers come to kill and burn honest people. Is that good? Who is made rich thereby, and who is made happy? ”

“Then you think you would be happier if the Czar were back,” suggested Peter.

“Is that what you have come to ask me?” demanded Rimsky, giving Peter a shrewd look. “Is it that you are counting those who want the Czar back? ”

“No, no,” said Peter. “I have nothing to do with the government. I will not say to any one what you say.”

“I cannot be too sure of that,” said Rimsky, and blew the smoke from his cigarette upward. “But when the Czar ruled, I had a watch.”

“Do you want a Czar back?” asked Peter.

“*Tchuk!*” cried Rimsky. “The Czar is in a well, they tell me. But how do I know what to believe? First it is one lie, and then another, till our heads whirl and we get drunk to forget so much talk about nothing. How do I know but that the Czar is on his throne and eating fish-pie for his dinner? ”

“But suppose a new Czar should come to the throne? ”

“Ah, now you are trying to have me talk politics and

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get into prison. It does not matter. I want only a fire, my tea, a good soup with meat and bones in it, and a pair of boots — and men who can be trusted, even if they be Czar's governors and cruel. Who is a man to appeal to now if he is robbed, as was I last month? In the old days robbers were hanged, and it taught them something, too."

"But you are speaking of Chita, of course. You had no complaint here, for you had a good Governor."

Rimsky went to the samovar and took off the little teapot, shook it with a circular motion, filled it with hot water and poured a glass made from the bottom of a bottle full of tea for Peter.

"You talk too much for a stranger," said Rimsky. "What do you know about our Governor? Is this the first time you have been in Siberia, young man?"

"Of course," said Peter, taking the tea. "But I have heard about Chita before."

"You may know more than you want to know about it before you get out," warned Rimsky. "Are you going to stay long — and buy more of my cigarettes?"

"I'll be here a few weeks, I suppose. I came to see if I could buy some furs."

"Oh, but you are a soldier," said Rimsky. "And you will find no furs that are good. Everybody is hunting men these days," and he broke out again in his cackling laugh, as he drew himself some tea in a little yellow bowl.

"Did the unfortunates kill the Governor who was here when they got out of the prison and freedom came to the people?"

"Did they?" asked Rimsky. "You tell me."

"But you were here, and you know. I was **not** here," said Peter.

Rimsky shrugged his shoulders and sucked his tea from the bowl.

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"The *provodnik* on the train told me that the soldiers killed the Governor here. What was the name? Kir —— well, I can't remember."

"Those fellows on the trains do a lot of talking," said Rimsky. "They are know-it-alls, and all they do is take grease from people who want to have food sent up to us."

"I'm afraid they don't tell the truth," said Peter.

"So they told you the soldiers killed Kirsakoff, did they? But Kirsakoff was not the Governor. You see that they lied."

"Perhaps they did not say he was Governor when he was killed. But they said he had been a Governor in the old days."

"If Kirsakoff had been killed, I would know it," said Rimsky.

"True," agreed Peter. "I thought the *provodnik* was talking to make wind and a big man of himself. I knew he was lying."

"How did you know that?"

"I guessed it. Now that you say Kirsakoff was not killed, I know it was a lie. Just big talk."

"Why should anybody kill Kirsakoff?" demanded Rimsky.

"That is what I should like to know. Everybody said he was a good man, but perhaps some people did not like him — people in the prison, of course, who were against the government."

"General Kirsakoff had been retired when the troubles came," said Rimsky. "More than seven years ago he was retired. I remembered well the time — I had a sore foot."

"Was he gone from Chita when the troubles came?"

"No, he was here," said Rimsky, looking straight at Peter.

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"Ah!" said Peter. "So the *provodnik* lied when he said Kirsakoff was dead. He is still here."

"What does it matter where he is?" asked Rimsky.

"It does not matter," said Peter, and set the glass on the table, buttoning his coat about his neck in preparation for leaving.

"I hear much gossip in this place," said Rimsky. "Where do you live in the city?"

"Thank you for the tea," said Peter. "It is cold outside. I may want some more cigarettes — at twenty rubles a box."

"I hear many matters spoken of here," hinted Rimsky with confidential air. "About where governors are and such talk."

"Is Zorogoff a good man?" asked Peter.

"It is a very cold day outside, true," said Rimsky. "But this is a good place to hear gossip."

"I care nothing for gossip. But I can see that you live on it, as an old gander lives on snails," said Peter laughingly. "I am going to the Dauria — I am an American officer. But see that you do not gossip about me, old fellow."

Rimsky wagged his old head and cackled wisely.

"A tight lip fools the devil," warned Peter. "If you talk I'll tell Zorogoff you charged me double for cigarettes. But I'll come in and see you some day, and bring a bottle of vodka."

"Then God guard you till you return!" cried Rimsky, and Peter went out through the door of the hut.

Rimsky sat chuckling into his beard after Peter had departed. And more than once the old cigarette-seller told himself, "The sturgeon does not become a sterlet because he leaves the river for the lake, and the Russian does not become a foreigner by changing his coat." That was a saying of wise men.

VII

OLD RIMSKY THINKS

OLD Rimsky had a wise head. Many people were afraid of him and said that he talked with witches and had charms against evil — and he did sell charms against sickness, bad luck and poor crops. Besides, he had the reputation of knowing many things before they happened. But he was merely a wise old owl with the keen perception of human motives which is sometimes given to the unlettered man, though he could read well enough to get the meanings out of newspapers if there were not too many words in the articles invented by aristocrats to fool the poor people.

He spent the remainder of the day thinking about the Russian in the American coat who paid double for cigarettes and took a profit in getting answers to questions. He had watched Peter closely, and turned the whole matter over mentally, sitting by his fire and drinking tea.

Rimsky decided that he had not been clever enough with the stranger. It was plain enough now that the stranger had come to learn something about Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff who had been Governor. And the stranger did not know where Michael was to be found. In some way the business could be turned to profit and over many glasses of smoky tea Rimsky evolved a plan by which he could put money in his purse.

There was an old pig-killing *moujik* named Ilya Andreitch who slept in the basement of a bakery on a street up near the bazaar. Ilya had worked for Kirsakoff years before, and should know where the general lived if any-

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body did. As for that, Rimsky now remembered that Ilya had once boasted that he knew where Kirsakoff lived since the troubles came and all the rich people were in hiding.

But there might be little in the boast, for Ilya was an old fool who was always pretending to know things. But for all his outward stupidity, Ilya was a sly rascal. His father had been sent into exile for taking money from revolutionists in Moscow by pretending to have knowledge of what the secret police were going to do — who was going to be arrested, and so on.

It happened that Rimsky had Ilya pretty much under the thumb, as the saying is. For Ilya had once fed the pigs of a watch-fixer in the city, and had stolen from his employer a whole handful of silver holy medals. Rimsky had bought them from Ilya for a tenth of their value. Out of appreciation for buying them, Ilya had spent all the money he got on vodka with Rimsky. The vodka had been stolen by a waiter in a restaurant owned by a Greek, and at half price sold it to Ilya, which was quite all right, for everybody stole from foreigners if they could. The thing for the foreigners to do is to stay at home and not go about selling food and drink at prices too high.

Rimsky knew that he might be able to induce Ilya to tell where Kirsakoff was living. That might mean double money for Rimsky. Kirsakoff would no doubt pay well to know that an American was seeking him, and the American would probably pay well to know where Kirsakoff might be found. It was only a matter of handling them properly.

And by delaying the information sought by both Kirsakoff and the man who called himself an American, a pretty penny might be realized. It was by such smart methods, Rimsky felt sure, that rich folks got rich. And by getting rich, they made poor folks poorer. Being rich was

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all simple enough, for there was only so much money in the world, and the trick was to get a lot of it by being smarter than other folks. There being many fools, the problem was easy enough. Rimsky knew that the Jews got rich by being able to figure interest on money, and by selling only when people wanted to buy and buying only when people wanted to sell.

So he contrived a plan by which Ilya was to supply the information for little or nothing, and Rimsky was to sell it for a bundle of rubles. It would not do to tell Ilya what was wanted. It would be best to loosen his tongue with vodka, and then accuse him of having lied when he had said he knew where Kirsakoff was living. That method would get Ilya to boasting and he would pop it all out. It could all be passed off as drinking talk, and if Ilya insisted on keeping his secret, it would be easy enough to turn the talk to holy medals. That would make Ilya see the honey pot, as the saying is; then he would get Ilya so drunk that he would forget all that had been said.

So when the lights began to appear in the shops across the Sofistkaya, Rimsky put up his own shutters over the window and wandered toward the bazaar to look in at the bakery where Ilya might be found.

It was quite dark when Rimsky reached the courtyard in rear of the building of the bakery. There was a shaft of flickering light dancing out from a partly open door, and the yard was filled with the comforting odor of burning dough. Rimsky planned to ask the bakers first for a man who once hauled wood for them — a peasant dead several months before. That would be excuse enough for coming, and talk could be made till it was time to ask casually for Ilya. That would throw sand in Ilya's eyes as to why Rimsky appeared at the bakery.

The old cigarette-seller prowled in through the door

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and stumbled over loose wood in the hall till he came to the great room where the bakers were working. A big man, bare to the waist, was drawing huge loaves from the stone stove with a wooden shovel. His damp skin shone in the dancing light. A group of men and women was sitting on benches in the dark side of the room about a samovar. A ball of dough was smoking on an iron sheet laid on the shoulder of the stove.

There had been the murmur of voices till Rimsky stood framed in the doorway of the room, looking in. When he appeared there was a sudden hush and silence, except for the grating of the wooden shovel as it drew out the steaming loaves and the cracking of the fire in the fire-pit.

"God's blessing on those who labor for us," said Rimsky, crossing himself.

Some one gave a muttered reply. The man drawing the loaves turned and peered at Rimsky and then went on deftly pulling out the bread, puckering his face against the heat.

A man came clumping down the hall and fell over the wood. Rimsky stood aside from the door, and the light from the fire revealed the man with a face shrouded by long and unkempt whiskers, and on his head a sheepskin cap black with dirt. He wore a ragged old coat with a rope turned round his middle several times as a belt.

"So this is my old friend, Ilya Andreitch!" exclaimed Rimsky. "It is long since I have seen you. Perhaps you can tell me of the friend I am looking for."

Ilya ogled him suspiciously.

"What has gone wrong that you should be here?" he growled. He had a healthy fear of Rimsky and wanted to forget the business of the holy medals.

"Can you tell me where I can find Vanusha?"

"You are chasing ghosts," grumbled Ilya, crossing himself at mention of a dead man. "That man is dead."

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Or is it that you are looking for souls for the devil?"

"Dead!" exclaimed Rimsky. "Now that is a pity. I came to get a drinking friend, but now I shall have to go and have a glass of vodka by myself in his memory. He owed me two rubles but he was a good man, I can say that for him."

"Better than I can say for you," Ilya called out into the dark yard after Rimsky, who had retreated abruptly from the hall. "He never drank his vodka alone, for one thing, like others I know, and they not far off. He was civil to his friends, I can say that — and when you are dead you had better take care that folks say the same of you."

"Then you didn't learn your manners from him," retorted Rimsky, stopping in the court. "You swing your tongue too much for an honest man — or to have it wet with vodka. When I drink I wish to be merry."

"You are an old wolf with the fleas!" called Ilya.

Rimsky laughed at him.

"May you die blind!" bawled Ilya.

"Oh, come and warm your belly with a sup of vodka," said Rimsky, "unless you think that if you turned good-natured you would come down with a distemper."

Ilya ran after him and the pair walked down to the little restaurant kept by a one-eared gypsy from Bessarabia where in the old days the thieves gathered to dispose of their loot to Chinese.

There were but a few people inside the place. A Buriat, who had probably sold some cattle, was lying across a table in a drunken stupor, his purple conical cap on the floor under his feet. A crippled beggar was drinking soup from a bowl with a wooden ladle, and a Chinese peddler of charms was gambling in a corner with a Mongol holy man.

Rimsky led the way to a table distant from the others

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and called for the serving girl. He was in good humor and ordered a whole bottle of vodka, swearing that he would take only the best and would break the tax seal with his own fingers.

"Something has turned your way, you old shark!" said Ilya. "Or perhaps this is your name day."

"No, it is that I am getting old and may as well spend my money before it falls into the hands of robbers," said Rimsky. "Soon I shall go to meet the dead. I pick up a few rubles a day. What is the use of keeping them these days? I want to spend them with my friends, and you are a good fellow and a great joker, Ilya Andreitch."

"True, I can make jokes if I have the wine," said Ilya, and hastened to take a swig from the first glass poured.

They proceeded to talk of nothings, and finished the bottle.

"Fetch another!" Rimsky called to the girl, "and I'll drink a health to the rings in your ears, my damsel. When you were — what am I saying? — when I was younger you would not have escaped without a kiss."

"You had better be putting your grandchildren to bed," retorted the girl, but she brought the bottle.

Ilya was suddenly filled with a desire to be modest in his drinking. He felt it would not be wise to abuse such a show of hospitality on the part of Rimsky. And the *moujik's* crafty brain suspected that there was a purpose behind Rimsky's unlimited generosity. Folks were not so free-handed without having good cause, he reasoned. So for every full glass that Rimsky drank, Ilya managed to dispose of but half a glass. He had a notion that if he could get Rimsky drunk there might be part of a bottle left which could be made away with and the joyous occasion could be carried on alone into the night and per-

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haps the following day. Also, he took good care that Rimsky always paid in advance by making a joke with the gypsy girl that Rimsky had no more money. Rimsky's generosity made Ilya suspicious.

"Pooh! Money!" said Rimsky, when the third bottle was brought. "I have enough money to buy all the vodka in the city."

"That's the vodka talking," sneered Ilya. "I feel as if I could buy a farm, but it would be another matter for me to find the money. That is the way with you."

"Don't go on so with big talk," warned Rimsky, "or I will begin to talk of the holy medals."

"Talk and the devil take you!" cried Ilya, thumping the bottle down on the table angrily. "If you do I'll go my way and wish a curse on you!"

"Sit still!" commanded Rimsky. "I've money enough, I tell you. If not, I can go and borrow from my rich friends."

Ilya laughed so loudly at this that he disturbed the drunken Buriat, who lifted his black head from the table and glared about the room. He looked like a mandarin, with his long thin drooping mustaches.

"But I tell you I have rich friends," insisted Rimsky. "I could go now and get a hundred rubles if I needed them — yes, twenty and a hundred and no interest. Kirsakoff would let me have them, and no questions asked, and nothing about when they should be paid back."

"What!" exclaimed Ilya, staring at Rimsky. "You say the old Governor would lend you twenty and a hundred rubles! *Tfu!* That's crazy talk!"

"Yes! You think I don't know the old Governor, eh! Well, Kirsakoff is a friend of mine, you had better know that."

"Pooh!" snorted Ilya. "You are an old mud-head! You don't even know where the old Governor lives in the

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city, and you sit there telling to me that he is your friend! Oh, ho, ho!"

"Perhaps you think you are the only one who knows where Kirsakoff lives? You are a fool who thinks he is wise, and that's the worst fool of all."

Ilya was cautious at once. He gave Rimsky a careful look, but Rimsky paid no attention to the look.

"Who told you I said I knew where Kirsakoff lived?" demanded Ilya.

"You said it yourself. I heard you say it last Butter Week in the bazaar. You were drunk and you went boasting about to the old man from Pischenko with the red boots. I heard you say it, Ilya Andreitch."

Ilya ruffled his brow and tried to remember when he had been talking to a man with red boots from Pischenko. He knew no one in that town who had red boots — unless it was the butcher's assistant who married the cake-maker.

"True," said Ilya. "I might have known then where Kirsakoff lived. I don't deny it. Perhaps I was drunk Butter Week. It wasn't my fault if I was sober. But that was a long time ago as time runs now — and I don't know where Kirsakoff lives now. And if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

Rimsky laughed good-naturedly. "Let us have another drink. You are a good fellow. Of course you do not know where Michael Alexandrovitch lives. If you did, you could have money, as I have. It is worth money to know where the old Governor lives."

Ilya saw that Rimsky was getting very drunk and seeking an argument.

"If you knew where Kirsakoff lived, who would pay?" asked Ilya, becoming greedy at the mention of money.

"Who? There are many. That is something I do

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not want to talk about, Ilya. Hold your tongue," and Rimsky picked up his glass and filled it again.

Ilya drank with sad mien, turning over in his mind Rimsky's statement that it was worth money to know where Kirsakoff lived. If that were true, Ilya argued to himself, he should have the money, for he knew where Kirsakoff lived with his daughter in an old log house in the outskirts of the city.

"I don't intend to hold my tongue," Ilya announced. "What I want to know is who would pay money to know where Kirsakoff lives!"

Rimsky was startled by the suddenness and vigor with which Ilya had put the matter before him. And Ilya leaned across the table, with a big and dirty fist thrust forward.

"Who?" asked Rimsky. "Why do you ask me that? What is there to fight over? We are good friends — we are — you are friend to me, or ——"

Rimsky swayed in his chair and could not finish. He made an effort to rally his drugged brain, but slipped deeper into the chair and his eyes closed on him despite all he could do to keep them open. His right arm flopped across the table limply, as useless as a dead seal's flipper.

"Everybody knows where Michael Kirsakoff lives," went on Ilya. "Why should any one pay money for what every one knows. That knowledge is not worth a beggar's kopeck." Ilya lied, but he sought to learn all he could before Rimsky got too deep into drunken slumber.

"True," muttered the befuddled Rimsky. "You talk true talk, Ilya Andreitch. But why do you fight with me when I can't see? What did I say?"

"You talked about there being money in knowing where Kirsakoff lived," accused Ilya.

Rimsky tried to remember why he had said any such thing. The matter must be as Ilya said — no one would

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give a beggar's kopeck to know where Kirsakoff lived. For that matter, Rimsky cared about nothing. The world was a very pleasant place for all people said about bad times. He could feel himself slipping away into a delicious unconsciousness, and he talked aloud the thoughts which crossed his mind.

"There is something wrong about this," he confided to himself, unaware that Ilya could hear what was said. Then he went on, head on chest, and almost under the table, muttering into his whiskers.

"The American officer — no, a Russian — well, the American officer — he wants to know where Michael lives. And he — will pay well. Didn't he come to my place asking about the old Governor? And where did he go? Yes, the Dauria, I remember, even if I am drunk — to the Dauria, where the Bolsheviki smashed all the windows. I know. I remember the time my father's cow fell in the river. Was Ilya there? No. How could Ilya be there — I am dreaming now. Let us all — be merry, for this is Carnival. Am I not a young man? That is right — dance — dance ———"

Rimsky began to snore softly. The gypsy girl came and grinned at Ilya, who reached out unsteadily and plucked the flame from the candle.

"Let him sleep," said Ilya to the girl. "He is a good fellow," and putting the cork back into the vodka-bottle which was half full by the best of good luck, he slipped it into his pocket, pulled his ragged old coat about his shoulders and tightened the rope belt. Then he slipped out of the restaurant, chuckling at his cleverness at putting Rimsky under the table and learning something which might put money into his own purse. Besides, he had the half-bottle of vodka.

He made up his mind to go at once to the house of Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff and sell the news he

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had heard — an American officer was at the Hotel Dauria and wanted to find the old Governor. Perhaps Michael would give five rubles for that news — if not five, then four, anyhow, a piece of boiled partridge. But Ilya decided that he would do his best to get five rubles. Michael Kirsakoff had plenty of money, and who was he anyway? — once a Governor, true, but no better now than Ilya Andreitch.

VIII

PETER LAYS HIS PLANS

PETER went back to the Hotel Dauria after his talk with Rimsky. The sleepy-eyed youth who had promised a room, carried Peter's baggage to the upper floor, where Peter signed the register in a cage-like little office.

Then they went on down a hall past a dining room which was deserted. Peter looked in. It was filled with battered tables, tubbed rubber plants in the window sills, and crazy chairs which had been used in defense and had legs in splints.

The walls had been stripped of paper. The mirrors of the buffet-counter at one end of the room had been smashed out and triangles of broken glass still stuck in the frames. The curtains had been pulled from the poles over the windows and the doors. Painted decorations on the wainscoting had been smeared with the contents of catsup and vinegar bottles, which had burst against the walls like star shells and the acids had discolored the pictures of the crude drawings so that the wall was spotted and leprous-looking.

Peter was taken to a large room at the end of the hall. It had three double windows overlooking the end of a side street that ran into the Sofistkaya, with a view of the latter. He could see the old post-house and the roof of Rimsky's hut sticking up between two higher buildings.

There was an iron bed without bedding. There was a standing screen in front of it. The chairs had been broken but were repaired. There were slashes in the

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woodwork about the door where bayonets had evidently been thrust at former guests. And some of the guests had fared badly, judging by the dark stains on the old oilcloth which covered the floor.

The plaster of the walls was pitted with bullet-holes, especially opposite the windows, and the panes of glass were newly puttied and still marked with the thumb-prints of the workmen.

"Can I have my meals served in the room?" asked Peter. The youth yawned.

"Yes. If you pay extra. Ring this bell three times for the samovar girl," and he pointed to a button in the wall near the door, and the youth departed, as if afraid that he would be asked to do something.

There was an electric drop lamp on a writing table, and running water in a little sink against the wall behind the screen. There was a tall wardrobe set against a second door which evidently led to another room.

It was hard for Peter to realize that Chita could be so modern. And the room, poor as it was, seemed like a palace to Peter. His mind had been readjusted to the things he had known as a boy by his visit to Rimsky. Peter Petrovitch Gorekin would have thought himself a king to have a room like this one in which Peter Gordon was to live.

But there was no Peter Gordon now. Peter Gorekin was back in Chita. The scene which opened to him from the windows had been for twenty years in the back of his brain. The little hut, the post-house, the Sofistkaya! He found it hard to believe that he had ever been away from Chita at all.

He sat down by the window. The mild heat from the radiator had thawed away most of the frost in the panes and he looked out over the city. Things that had been but memories were now real, truly existing before his eyes

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in spite of his years of trying to blur their images out of his mind.

The old superstitions of peasants and exiles which he had learned in his father's hut as a boy returned to his mind — tales of werewolves who took the shapes of men for diabolical purposes. Was there not something in it all? Was not he himself something like a werewolf? Was he not a Russian in an American coat? Michael Kirsakoff would never suspect an American officer of being the son of a dead exile. Nor would Kirsakoff suspect an American officer of being the same poor boy who had been thrown into prison for a whim — now come for vengeance.

The mysticism inherent in his race, the queer inarticulate yearnings and the dissatisfactions of the Slavic soul, came to the surface in Peter's consciousness. But now he had knowledge of things, and power, and the means of carrying out his own ends. He would play the game carefully to an end in Chita, and then go on to Irkutsk without any one's suspecting that the American officer had killed Kirsakoff.

He began to think of his return to Chita as a holy mission. Affairs had turned out well for him from the first. He had managed to get to Siberia instead of going to France. He had managed to get himself ordered to Irkutsk, and had slipped away from his Russian orderly with no one the wiser that Peter Gordon was really a Russian. And there was every evidence that Kirsakoff was still alive and that he was still in Chita. The reticence of Rimsky in discussing Kirsakoff was proof enough to Peter that the former Governor might be found somewhere in the Valley of Despair.

He took off his tunic and rang for a samovar. A slattern of a girl, dirty and unkempt, came trembling to the door to ask what was wanted. She was not more than

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fifteen — round-cheeked, with scared blue eyes, and brown hair down her back. She was wearing men's cast-off old shoes. Peter looked at her with pity.

"Will you bring me some spice-cakes and a samovar?" he asked gently.

"Yes, master," she said, and turned to escape.

"Don't be frightened," said Peter. "I am an American."

"Yes, master," she repeated. But she had no comprehension of what he had said.

"Here are five rubles for you," said Peter, holding out the note to her.

But she fled through the door as he moved toward her.

"The same old system working," thought Peter, as he watched the poor girl running down the hall. "The poor people frightened out of their wits by the ruling class! Damn such a country!"

He closed the door. He realized now that oppression was not dead in the country. His years in America had dimmed his memories of such scenes. He had begun to think that the revolution had bettered conditions for the people, that in the twenty years since he was a boy in Siberia there had been improvement.

The old rage began to grow in him again. He lusted to kill. He wanted to help the people, aside from his own blood vengeance. He wondered if his dead father had not been able to help in having the son return to Chita. His return might be in the nature of a destiny which it would be sinful to avoid, even divine in its workings. It was all as if some controlling star had put power into his hands, and had swung him back to the land of his boyhood. It would be impossible to go against fate. He felt that no man could stand out against what had every sign of being a directed destiny.

Peter was filled with a strange exaltation, a very frenzy

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of joy over the thought that it would now be possible to pay off his old debt of revenge against Michael Kirsakoff. The words of an old folk song began to run through his mind and he hummed it gently, pausing to catch some of the almost forgotten words.

He got out his razor and shaved himself before the big wall mirror between the windows. The peace and quiet of his room were luxuries after the days and nights of living and sleeping on the pounding train among the Czech soldiers. He had time now for careful planning, and he desired to make the acquaintance of Kirsakoff at leisure, arrange the details of how the Governor should be killed and then carry through the project with all possible skill so that his tracks might be covered. There would be many pitfalls to avoid, many nicely balanced circumstances.

It would not be enough for Peter merely to kill Kirsakoff. The Governor must know who brought death to him, must understand before he was sent into eternity that it was Peter Petrovitch Gorekin, son of the boot-maker, who took vengeance.

The girl came with the samovar and the cakes and left them on the table. She fled again without taking the five-ruble note which Peter had left upon the table for her.

Peter sat by the window and ate and drank. The sun dropped behind the rim of the hill and twilight came swiftly. In the street below a line of rude carts passed, drawn by frosty ponies with their drivers plodding along behind the carts. They walked like men in their sleep, oblivious of everything about them and steeped in the torturing cold.

Farther up the street four men were drifting about aimlessly, tipsy with vodka. They drew together at times to engage in maudlin argument, and staggered about like

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clumsy bears, lurching at one another in wild plunges and falling in the street.

The four roisterers disappeared. A squad of Japanese soldiers came stumbling down the street, evidently going on guard at the station for the night. They appeared to be half frozen, but they doggedly maintained some semblance of military formation. Their heads were so wrapped in cloths that they could hardly see their way, and the fur straps across their faces were white with frost from the moisture of their nostrils. Their big shoes were stuffed with straw, which hung out over the tops. The agonizing cold, despite the heavy clothing of the men, had penetrated to their bodies and had chilled them to a condition akin to lethargy. They walked as if through semiliquid air which impeded their movements.

Peter remained by the window smoking, while the frost gradually grew up the windows. He was wondering how he could find Kirsakoff. It would not do to make direct inquiries. It might be possible to draw more from Rimsky, but it would be wise to wait before pressing the cigarette-seller to talk about Kirsakoff. The graybeard would be suspicious — he was already suspicious that Peter had some other motive in going to the hut than buying cigarettes. Yes, it would be safer to keep away from Rimsky for a few days, and perhaps wise not to move about the city too much and start gossip. He might be watched at first, but after a few days his presence in the city would be taken as a matter of course. Then he could begin his quest for Kirsakoff.

With this decision for the future, Peter prepared for bed.

IX

ILYA USES HIS WITS

ILYA ANDREITCH, having left Rimsky in a state of gorgeous befuddlement at the gypsy's restaurant, hurried up the street to the house of Michael Kirsakoff and his daughter. It would be great news, the coming of an American who wished to find Kirsakoff. It might be a government matter, for as everybody with an ounce of brains in his head knew, the Americans were going to take full control of Russia — some wise folk even said that the Americans would annex Russia as a province of America. Others said the Czar had gone to America and had conquered it, including Venice. Those were matters which Ilya considered in spare moments; just now he felt that this news of the American needed full attention.

Ilya could see the glowing coals of a sentinels' bonfire up near the church. Also, there were sounds of music and singing in the direction of a barrack, and the rattle of a droshky coming across the little bridge over the Ingoda. So he did not feel too lonely. There was no moon up yet, but the stars were out and hanging low. The thin, sweet air drenched his lungs, and cleared his brain somewhat.

Now he heard a man walking near by. Ilya stopped to listen, cocking his head to one side. But when Ilya stopped, the man stopped also — and then Ilya realized that it was his own footsteps which he had heard, crunching the hard snow musically. He laughed discreetly, taking care that the sentries should not hear him, and started on again toward the outer rim of the city.

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But he was a little afraid that he might not get past some of the sentry groups without being stopped and questioned, or perhaps arrested. He got off the hard walk and into the center of the sandy street, so that his boots would not make a noise. He got out his bottle — the bottle which he had taken from the restaurant table — and had a swig from it to give himself courage. It would be no simple matter to go talking to Kirsakoff, who, though an Excellence, was a cruel old bones of a man.

But Ilya reflected that times had changed. He was as good as anybody now, and knew as much as anybody. The revolution had done that for him, and a revolution was good fun. Was not even Rimsky, who had once held himself to be better than a *moujik*, now buying vodka for *moujiks*? Hurrah for the revolution! And as for that, hadn't he fooled Rimsky and drawn from him the news that the American had come to see Kirsakoff? That was proof enough as to who had the better wit. Ilya gave himself credit for the manner in which he had handled the whole matter.

Kirsakoff should give at least five rubles for the news, not a kopeck less. Ilya settled that to his own satisfaction, took another swig, and went on. A wolf howled in the hills above the city, and Ilya crossed himself against the wiles of the devil.

He passed the black dome of the church. The air was like crystal and nothing cast a shadow, not even the iron fence about the old cemetery of the church. And when the stars are so bright and hang so low that nothing throws a shadow, there are witches about.

Ilya hurried on, getting more nervous with every step, till he was in the outer limits of the city. Then he crossed some old gardens to get in among the log houses which stood at the end of the street. In that way he avoided a group of sentries who were singing about their fire.

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He located Kirsakoff's house. It stood on a corner of two streets, with a log wall enclosing the *dvor*, or courtyard — the garden, the well, the wagon-sheds. The windows let out no light, but stood out like tablets of ivory set into the dark house, their frosty panes glistening under the stars.

Ilya went round to the great gate. Some old water casks were lying about it in disorder. One of them was close to the wall of the court. Ilya moved it a little, and mounting it, reached up to some old cords and dead vines running along the top of the logs. He took off his mittens and felt for a cord that had tied in it a certain number of knots. He pulled it thrice, and then climbed down from the cask, and stood in close to the wall, so that any person looking up the street would not see him, for his figure would be merged with the dark background of the wall.

A sentry-fire burned redly out in the end of the street. A few dark figures were visible about it. Somewhere Ilya heard a Cossack challenge, and the rattle of a rifle-bolt in the crisp air. A pig began to squeal away in the direction of the Chinese quarter. Ilya missed the friendly barking of dogs, for the dogs of the city had somehow disappeared since the troubles came and many people were starving. The unnatural stillness of the night held a covert menace, as if all creatures, humans and wild beasts, were walking about on their toes in dread, or crouched to spring upon some lurking enemy. It was likely that hill tigers were about. The occasional howl of a wolf seemed to be tinged with a note of triumph, as if they were waiting for their old wilderness to be restored to them by men. The wolves were once more hunting close to the city and getting arrogant and fat. Men were too busy hunting each other to waste time or ammunition on the great packs of timber wolves.

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A small door in the wall, close to where Ilya stood, opened inward a few inches, slowly and cautiously, for the frost cracked the ancient hinges with sharp complaints.

"It is Ilya — Ilya Andreitch," he whispered into the aperture of the gate.

"You are a fool to come here in the starlight," growled Wassili. "Are you blind, that you cannot see the brightness of the stars, or have you a mole for an uncle?"

"What does it matter?" whispered Ilya easily. He did not mind being insulted by Wassili, knowing in time that he would have the laugh on Kirsakoff's *moujik*.

The gate opened a few more inches, and Ilya needed no greater hint, but slipped through, and the gate closed after him.

"You smell like a *kabak*," grumbled Wassili.

"That is why you opened the gate," said Ilya with a chuckle. "You have a nose for vodka, even if you are not civil to your friends."

"But you will be seen by enemies, to come here so boldly," went on Wassili, not so easily altered in his temper.

"I? No one saw me. I am as secret as an owl. Those fools of soldiers are all drunk and talking in their sleep. They shoot their guns at the moon every night, to scare honest folk away."

"What brings you?" demanded Wassili. "Am I to stand here freezing because you want to gossip?"

"I came to talk with Michael Alexandrovitch," said Ilya with pomposity. He swayed unsteadily on his feet, for the vodka he had drunk was again asserting its potency because he had been standing still so long outside the gate. He blew gently down into his whiskers to melt away the ice which had formed in the bristles from his breath.

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"Hmf!" growled Wassili. "Perhaps you think Michael Alexandrovitch has baked a pig for your coming? Have you forgotten that Michael Alexandrovitch is an Excellence?"

"I am as good as he, Excellence or no Excellence," retorted Ilya. "What I remember is the revolution, and that Ilya Andreitch is as good as the Czar. But I have brought news for the Excellence. Are we to stand here warming the night with our breaths, when Michael Alexandrovitch would be glad to know what I know?"

"He could salt his porridge with what you know," scorned Wassili. "What news do you bring?" He was still doubtful of the legitimacy of Ilya's visit, and suspected his coming to be a desire for drunken argument.

"When a man brings news in these times, he might have a glass of hot tea," hinted Ilya. "It is about government, and I have come with big news about what is being done outside this place."

"You have brought a monkey with you, that is what," muttered Wassili, meaning that Ilya was foolishly drunk. But he fastened the bolt of the gate. He was now shivering with the cold and sulky about it, though he did not dare risk sending Ilya away if there was any chance of valuable information's coming to the attention of his master, Kirsakoff.

"Whoosh! Is not a monkey smarter than a fox? You old pothead, you sit here all day looking at your feet, while I learn government news and risk my neck to bring it here and ——"

"Be still!" commanded Wassili. "You can be heard to the hills a night like this! You smell of fresh-killed pig and vodka, for all your government talk. Is that the way to come to the house of Excellence? Follow along with that noisy tongue of yours, but keep your fingers on

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it, for it wags too freely and you will lose it along with your head, if you are not careful."

"Yes, and I'll bring a drink of vodka along for you, if you have a fire in your samovar, you old spider."

"It is good you bring something besides talk," grumbled Wassili, as he led the way under the overhanging roof of the shed and along through the gloom to the door of the kitchen. Ilya stumbled along after him, blundering among the kettles and other gear and making such a racket that Wassili cursed him for having too many legs. But Ilya, in a gay mood, chuckled into his beard and was only concerned lest he lose his footing and have a tumble that would break the precious bottle in his pocket.

They entered the kitchen, which had its windows hung with old blankets to keep the light hidden. There was a wall-stove and a cooking stove with ovens built of stone. A candle burned on the table. There were partridge feathers in a sink and the remnants of cabbages that had been cut up on a board. A big earthen jar of gooseberry jam stood open on the table and beside it a fat yellow bowl full of white honey, which gave off a sweet odor and made Ilya think of bees in the fields in summer.

Wassili sat down and rested his elbows on the table. His pockmarked face had a glum look, and his pale yellow whiskers bristled with belligerency for Ilya, as if the *moujik* were in for trouble unless his story should be of sufficient import for the visit. Wassili's blue caftan, pale and washed out like the garment of a Chinese coolie, was strapped about him with a bit of scarlet cloth which had once been embroidered. His feet were wrapped in skins, ready to be slipped into the big boots standing limply by the bench upon which he sat. He had not put them on when he went out to admit Ilya.

"Let us be merry while we can," began Ilya, anxious to

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improve the atmosphere of the kitchen as represented by the scowling Wassili. So Ilya threw himself down sprawlingly on a bench opposite Wassili, and loosened the old rope about his coat. Then he pulled his bottle from his pocket with a flourish of good-fellowship and slammed it down upon the table with a thump. "We will all be dead in time that will come soon enough, so I will have a glass of tea and a spice-cake before I talk with the Excellence."

"The wind is full of news," said Wassili sadly, but the sight of the bottle put him in slightly better humor. He leaned down and squinted across it, to gauge its contents.

"How is the health of Excellence?" asked Ilya, his courage bolstered by a sudden remembrance of his own importance and a desire to return to the subject of statecraft in connection with Michael Kirsakoff.

Without answering, Wassili poured himself a generous draft from the bottle into a thick glass, and nodding to Ilya in place of speaking a health, tossed the liquor off with a clicking sound in his throat and a harsh appreciative grunt.

"Bring the spice-cakes and the glasses for tea," he called out to the other room. An old serving woman peered into the kitchen, appraised Ilya with critical eyes, and then shambled away for the cakes and glasses.

Ilya's yellowed teeth grinned across the table at Wassili.

"Now when am I to talk with Michael Alexandrovitch, eh?" he demanded, crossing his legs importantly and rubbing one knee with his paw of a hand. "Don't forget why I have come, Wassili, and that my business is with the master."

"You will see Excellence when you see him," said Wassili.

"True!" said Ilya. "But I shall not leave that to

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you, if I have to hammer him up myself. This is a matter of government."

"There is no one in the house but the old woman and myself," said Wassili, with a flourish of his arm. "Excellence is gone, and your whiskers will be longer before you see him."

"May the devil tear out your tongue, for it does not speak the truth," said Ilya without anger. "This is not a time for lying, when your master is waiting for news from me."

Wassili flourished his arm as an expression of his annoyance, and blurted out surlily, "Then go above for yourself and see, if you know better than I."

The old woman shuffled into the room, and put the glass and a plate of cakes before Ilya, giving him a suspicious eye, and glancing disapprovingly at Wassili for permitting what she regarded as a dangerous intrusion. But she did not linger at the table longer than was necessary to throw down the plate and the tea-glass.

Ilya picked up a spice-cake and inspected it carefully by the light of the candle, the maneuver being nothing but a way of delaying his speech till the old woman had disappeared.

"I have come with news about an American who is in the city," he began, and bit into the cake.

Wassili turned upon him quickly.

"You are a liar!" he exclaimed with ferocity. "There are no Americans in the city here — they are only in Vladivostok, and you are blowing a trumpet in this house while you eat our cakes." Wassili's attitude was almost ferocious.

"Then you know better than I," said Ilya, blinking at him across the table and munching the dry cake.

"You are drunk, and you dare come here in these times and put a fool's cap on me — and the master!"

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"True, I am drunk," replied Ilya through a mouthful of dry cake. "And I hope I'll die drunk and go to heaven. But do you think I'm fool enough to run my legs off and come here, risking bullets in my back when I might be sitting by the fire with my bottle? Do you think I come here just to look at your old mud-head? I cared nothing for your master before the revolution, but now that I'm as good as he, why should I not do him a good turn if I can — and he has a few spare rubles to make it worth my time?" Ilya blew crumbs of dry biscuit at Wassili with the words.

"Don't come here and preach at me like a pope!" cautioned Wassili, who was puzzled by Ilya's newly acquired attitude of independence. Ilya was evidently sure of his ground — or gone mad entirely.

"What!" cried Ilya. "You talk to me like that! And I have come to tell the master news! Very good. I know the way home again, and may your bones never know what it means to be buried."

"Where are these Americans you talk about?" demanded Wassili, as he saw that it would be wiser to let Ilya have his say.

Ilya snorted, but showed his teeth in a grin of triumph. "I shall go and tell the American officer that Kirsakoff and his daughter have gone, eh? That is what you say. Very good. That will be all right, I suppose — till it happens that way, and then Excellence will kick you till you squeal. Then you will wish that you had listened to Ilya Andreitch and had not tried to make yourself into an Excellence with big manners."

"Come, come," protested Wassili amiably. "Let us not argue. Tell me what you know and ——"

"I shall tell Excellence myself," broke in Ilya. "I am a free man. What good is a revolution if one man cannot speak to another? Go and tell Excellence that

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Ilya Andreitch, who cut wood for him in the year of the pestilence, has come with news."

Wassili laughed, and taking advantage of a fit of sneezing suffered by Ilya from having breathed particles of dry cake, helped himself to another draft from the bottle of vodka.

"Perhaps I had better tell Excellence that a Grand Duke has come to see him, eh?" and Wassili reached across the table and poked Ilya in the ribs.

"Am I not as good as a Grand Duke?" demanded Ilya. "I am alive to enjoy my vodka and many a Grand Duke would like to be able to say that, you old fish-gut! Go and tell the Excellence that I have come."

Wassili got up. "See that you don't finish the bottle while I'm gone," he warned Ilya, and disappeared through a door into a hall, and Ilya heard him climbing a creaky stairs.

X

"AN AMERICAN HAS COME!"

MICHAEL KIRSAKOFF was seated at a table writing a letter by the light of a candle when Wassili knocked at the door of his room. The old general's eyes lifted to the door and made a pair of gleaming points against the gloom behind him. The broad gold straps on the shoulders of his uniform jacket set off his white old head so that it appeared to be resting on a golden tray which threw out a quivering sheen of yellow light with the trembling of his shoulders. His thin white hand dropped the pen. He motioned to Katerin to move behind him so that she stood in the shadow of his body, and recognizing Wassili's cautious knock, he ordered the *moujik* to enter.

"Master, Ilya Andreitch has come with news of the government."

"Who is Ilya Andreitch?" demanded the old general.

"Ilya, he who once cut wood for the Excellence. I know the man well. He has often bought food for us in the bazaar since we came here. He helped me to bring many things to this house from the other, but he is drunk to-night. Yet he vows he has news of the government."

The old general was puzzled. Katerin stepped into the light and looked at Wassili eagerly.

"What is the news Ilya brings?" she asked gently, afraid that her father might say something which would discourage Wassili from permitting Ilya to tell his story.

"There is an American officer come to Chita to find the

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Excellence," said Wassili, with a bow. "I do not know — it is Ilya Andreitch who says it and he ——"

Katerin struck her hands together and gave a cry of joy. "An American!" she cried. "Can it be, my father, that our friends have at last sent help to us?"

"You say an officer?" exclaimed Michael, his eyes on Wassili, and burning with an eager light.

"So it is said, master."

"By the Holy Saints!" exclaimed Michael. "We shall escape Zorogoff if this is true! Who else can have sent him but our friends?"

Katerin was crying with joy. She threw her arms about her father's neck and kissed him. Till now she had restrained her emotions, hidden her fears, and faced death calmly, but the news that aid was at hand released all her terrors and flooded them with a burst of happiness.

"True, our friends have got our letters and have sent an American to save us!" she exclaimed through her tears. "God of the heavens is good to us, and has answered our prayers at last, so that we shall have peace and safety. This is the end of your tortures, my father!"

"It is of you I think, Katerin Stephanovna," said Michael, and he grasped her hands and pulled them to his mouth to kiss them. "What I have suffered I have suffered for you, for death means nothing to me if you can be safe."

"Tell us, Wassili," urged Katerin. "Did the American officer bring word from friends? Is he to come here for us and take us away? And did he say who sent him?"

The gray old head of Michael snapped forward, the wisps of white hair waving gently. His eyes bored into Wassili while waiting for the *moujik* to answer.

"Ilya Andreitch told me but little, master. At first I thought he was drunk and did not trust him. And when I told him that he must tell me, he said he would talk with

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no one but Excellence, and that it was secret. Thus I would not bring him up till you had given the order for his coming.”

“Then he is below now? Bring him up, and hasten, for we have no time to lose. Zorogoff may be here again with the light of morning and I am but now writing what shall be done when he has killed me. We must see this American officer with all speed before the Ataman is able to balk him. By the Holy Saints! This will save my daughter from death — for she will die before she submits to the will of this Mongol brigand! Go! Bring Ilya Andreitch before me and we shall hear his say!”

Wassili ran out into the hall and down the stairs, well pleased with the results of his report to his master, for he had feared that he had made a mistake in admitting Ilya at all.

Michael and Katerin could scarcely wait for Ilya to come up. The news of deliverance from their dangers — safety so close at hand after long weary months of hiding and worry — came like a pardon to two who were condemned to death. It had been five days since the Ataman had left them. He was still torturing them, for his threat against Katerin would undoubtedly be carried out unless she killed herself. They knew that Zorogoff would attempt to take them to his “palace” in revenge for their insults. And they had planned to die together rather than to permit the Mongol to carry out his evil purpose. That was the only way in which they could defeat him.

“Our letter to the Baranoffs got through,” said Michael. “It is they who have sent this American.”

“And do you think he will come here — to-night?” asked Katerin, her pale, drawn face alight with the joy of escape. “I cannot believe yet that we are to be safe again! God has answered my prayers! My father, I had given up hope!”

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"Perhaps Ilya brings a letter from the American officer," said Michael. "If he has sent word to us by Ilya, he must have also given Ilya something so that we shall know the American comes from friends. We cannot delay. If the Ataman should hear of this American ——"

"They are coming up," said Katerin, and they heard Wassili and Ilya mounting the stairs. Soon the light of a shaking candle appeared down the hall, and Katerin threw open the door of the room.

Wassili blew out the candle when he entered, and thrust Ilya in ahead of him.

"Here is Ilya Andreitch, master," said Wassili, and Ilya blinked at the candle on Michael's table, bowed, and stood nervously fingering his cap.

"You bring us news, Ilya Andreitch," began Michael when Katerin had closed the door. Michael's thin, weak voice took on some of the relief he felt at knowing that help was at hand after months of danger in a world which had apparently gone mad, and he spoke somewhat in his old manner of authority.

"I?" asked Ilya. "Yes, Excellence. I bring good news to your house — and to the mistress." He bowed again, this time to Katerin, who had gone to her father.

"Wassili says an American officer has sent you," prompted Katerin, seeing that Ilya was perturbed and might be stricken dumb by fear of being before the former Governor.

"He is at the Dauria, mistress," said Ilya faintly, and turned to Wassili as if he expected the *moujik* to take up the story now, and go on with it.

"At the Dauria Hotel," agreed Katerin. "And you have brought a message from him to us?"

Ilya looked round the room wildly, seeking some escape from the eyes of Michael which bore upon him steadily.

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“Have you a message from the American?” asked Katerin gently.

“I?” Ilya looked at her in amazement, and turned toward the door. Then he bowed again to Michael and Katerin to cover his confusion.

“What did the American say?” urged Katerin, and Wassili gave utterance to a faint snort of disgust and prodded Ilya in the back.

“What did the American say? Who knows?” asked Ilya.

“The fool is drunk!” growled Michael. “Come! Speak up! Or have you drowned your tongue in vodka and come here to make fools of us?”

Ilya’s face began to perspire, and he twisted his cap into a rope.

“Have no fear, Ilya,” said Katerin soothingly.

“May God smite me!” cried Ilya. “It was Rimsky who told me about it and I ran here to tell the Excellence!”

“And who is Rimsky?” demanded Michael. “Where did he learn of the man who has come to see me?”

Ilya brushed his brow with the back of his hand. “Rimsky is an old friend of mine — a good man, Excellence, who means harm to no one and is a loyal man to his Czar.”

“And what did this Rimsky tell you?”

“That the Excellence would pay me well to bring the news.”

Michael laughed and his irritation disappeared.

“So you have a friend named Rimsky who gives away my money, eh? And so I will pay you — if we can dig the news out of your skull. Now tell us what it is that the American said.”

Ilya began to twist his cap into a rope with both hands, and swallowed spittle.

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"Excellence, I have done no harm," he began. "I am a poor man. I once cut wood for the Excellence. I am very secret. Rimsky tried to fish it from me where the Excellence was living, but I did not tell him. I left him drunk, and he does not know that I know where the Excellence lives, and he does not know I have come to the house of Excellence."

Ilya looked triumphantly at Katerin after this speech, and bowed again, feeling that he had handled the matter well, though he sought a sign of approval from the daughter of the Governor.

"What has all this to do with the American officer?" asked Michael. "That is what we are talking about, Ilya. You are very smart to have done what you did — now tell us more of it."

"Rimsky sells cigarettes in an old *isba* in the Sofistkaya," resumed Ilya. "He told me it was a pity he did not know where the Excellence lived, and he fished me for it. That is all. And I have come to tell Excellence."

Michael expressed his dismay by a look at Katerin. He believed now that Ilya's visit was only some drunken foolishness, or probably a trick.

"They have told this to Ilya so that they might follow him here. This is the work of enemies," said Michael.

"Master!" began Wassili, holding up his hand, and then turning to Ilya, said, "You told me it was a matter of government. You said there was an American. Tell the master, as you told me, fool!"

"May God smite me, it is as I say!" retorted Ilya to Wassili with a show of anger. "There is an American come for Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff, the master general and Governor. It is truth!"

"You say it, but how do you know it?" asked Katerin. She was beginning to feel that her father was right — that there were no grounds for their hopes other than a

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desire of this crafty *moujik* and some of his fellows to squeeze money from her father. But she concealed her disappointment.

"Rimsky told me, mistress, that is how I know," said Ilya with a bow.

"And it was Rimsky who sent you to this house?" said Michael. "Now, the truth!"

Ilya stared at the floor and tried to think. In a way, it was true that Rimsky had sent him to the house, and yet it was not true in just the way that Michael was saying. The *moujik's* brain was not equal to a quick and accurate reply when folk of education twisted things up so.

"I? No, master. Rimsky does not know I came to this house. How could he send me here when he has no knowledge of where the Excellence lives? I told no one because I am very secret, master."

"Then the American did not send you?" snapped Michael.

Ilya turned to Katerin. "There is an American, mistress," he insisted.

"You know nothing of an American but what this fool Rimsky told you?" insisted Michael. "Come! You have not seen the American?"

"How could I see him, master?" asked Ilya.

Michael gave a snort of disgust and leaned back in his chair. "It is nothing," he said sadly. "Send Ilya away," with a look at Wassili.

"I can see the American, mistress," pleaded Ilya, aghast at the idea that his visit had come to nothing and fearful of what Wassili might do once they were in the courtyard again. "I speak truth! There is an American officer come seeking the master general!"

"Ilya Andreitch, I will give you fifty rubles if you will find this American," said Katerin, hopeful again as

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she saw that Ilya was in earnest — at least she was determined not to make the mistake of sending Ilya away without making sure of what he did know. She knew that he was frightened, and that behind his fear there was more information than he was able to put into words.

“I can find him, mistress, if he is at the Dauria — I know the place well. I was there but yesterday with pig-livers.” His eyes glittered with the richness of the reward promised.

“This is a trap of Zorogoff’s to get us to leave the house,” growled Michael.

“Not if there is an American in the city to see us,” said Katerin.

“Some spy got Rimsky to tell this story to Ilya and then watch him to see where he went. I do not like it. Or perhaps they want you to go to the hotel seeking this mythical officer and seize you there. I tell you it is a trap, my daughter.”

But Katerin picked up the pen on the table and wrote on a sheet of paper this note in Russian:

The man who takes this to you can find us again. Time is precious for we are in great danger. Be discreet. Say who sends you that we may know you are from friends.

She did not sign the note, but dried the ink over the candle, folded it, and handed it to Ilya with a handful of rubles which she took from between the leaves of a book on the table.

“Give this to the American officer if you find him at the Dauria. If he has come for us, let him tell you so. But you are not to come back here to our house — Wassili will meet you at the *sobrania* at midnight, and you are to tell Wassili what the American says. Do not tell the American where we are but let him send a message and the name of the friend who has sent him. That will be

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our proof that he is not an enemy. Talk with no one about this — and when you have told Wassili what the American says, go home to bed and do not drink. If you give a true message to Wassili you shall have fifty rubles more to-morrow.”

“He will be drunk as an owl ten minutes after he gets to the Sofistkaya and the first *kabak*,” grumbled Michael. “And if he finds this American, how is the American to read Russian?”

“If he come from friends, he must know something of Russian, else he would not have come by himself — and perhaps he has with him some man who can read it for him.”

“You are wasting your breath and my ink,” said Michael. “I think nothing of this business.”

“God’s blessing on you, mistress,” said Ilya, crossing himself twice and turning to follow Wassili out of the room. “I shall be very secret and do as you command — and I shall not go drinking wine with the money.”

Wassili lighted his candle from the flame of the one burning on the table and opened the door. Ilya went out before him, and they both descended the stairs.

“It is all a trap, as I have said,” Michael went on again, staring disconsolately into the flame of the candle, his head bent forward on his breast. “This is the Ataman’s work — and he will come again in the morning to mock us.”

“I have faith that God has saved our lives,” said Katerin. “If an American is in the city who seeks us, I shall go to him myself in case Ilya fails us.”

“Then you would be going to your doom, my daughter,” and Michael dropped his face into his outspread arms upon the table to conceal the dejection which had come over him again since he believed that Ilya had come on a fool’s errand.

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“Hope is greater than fear, my father,” said Katerin, and lifted his head from the table to kiss him. “Who knows? By dawn we may be safe with this American. We must pray that Wassili will bring us a message at midnight which means the end of our troubles. Zorogoff will not dare defy an American officer.”

“Zorogoff will defy the devil himself,” said Michael. “I put little hope in this fool’s tale, but if it will make you happy, I will hope and believe till we know that there is nothing to be gained from this Ilya and his foolishness. And what you have just said about going to the hotel yourself — that must not be. I shall not let you out of my sight.”

“Then perhaps we may both go,” said Katerin. “We would be in no greater danger if we tried to find the American than if we waited here for Zorogoff.”

“We shall stay here,” said Michael. “I am too old and wise to be fooled by Mongol tricks. If I knew you could be safe I would be happy to say farewell to you forever — but God tells me that we are in greater danger now than ever, and we must trust no one. Come! Hand me my pen again, that I may write down the things you should remember when I am dead.”

XI

THE FLIGHT

WASSILI lurked in front of the *sobrania* from midnight till near morning. There was a ball going on inside the building and many people coming and going during the night, mostly officers of Zorogoff's forces and their women. But Wassili saw nothing of Ilya, though he gossiped with the droshky-drivers about the *sobrania*, warming himself against the biting cold by frequent drinks of tea at a restaurant across the street.

When he had almost decided to return to Kirsakoff and report that he had not seen Ilya, he heard that Ilya had been killed. Then Wassili gathered such details as he could, and along toward morning hastened homeward with his story.

Katerin saw the disaster in the *moujik's* face when he appeared at the door of her room, breathing hard from a run up the stairs. His hands were covered with candle wax as a result of their shaking.

"What news, Wassili?" she cried.

"The Cossacks killed Ilya soon after he left this house, mistress," panted Wassili. "He crossed an old garden to evade the sentries, and did not stop when they halted him. He fell with six bullets in him — and they say in the city that he was a spy, for he carried a secret message."

"Your message to the American," said Michael, who had waited up for the return of Wassili. "It is as I said — Ilya was bait for the Ataman's trap. There is no

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American. If you had gone with Ilya you would have been seized, my daughter, and if I had gone, I would have been shot down. We are lost — the story about the American was a myth to draw us from the house.”

“But, master, there is truth in what Ilya told us,” put in Wassili.

“What?” cried Michael. “You, too? Are you fool enough to believe now what Ilya Andreitch said?”

Katerin had sat down on a bench when she heard that Ilya had been killed, her hope crushed again. Now she sprang up at Wassili’s words, waiting for him to go on.

“It is truth, master,” insisted Wassili. “I had the news in the city, so what Ilya said must have been true.”

“Who told you?” cried Katerin. “Did they say he had come for us? Is he at the Dauria? Did you see him?”

Wassili was overwhelmed by such a volley of questions, and he paused to catch his breath and assort his information from his memory before he should reply.

“Come! Come! Rattle your tongue, Wassili!” commanded Michael. “Sit here and talk!”

Wassili sank upon the bench while Michael and Katerin hovered over him.

“An *iswostchik* told me,” began Wassili. “His father was in the Siberian Rifles with mine and I can trust his word. He told me that he drove an American officer to the Dauria — two days ago. If the American officer is there now, I cannot say. But there is none among the *iswostchiks* who has taken him back to the station. That I know, for I asked many of them — and they would know if the stranger had been taken away.”

“Thanks to God!” cried Katerin. “Then though poor Ilya is dead, there is still hope for us. We must pray that he spoke the truth. Tell us more, Wassili.”

“It came about this way,” resumed Wassili. “I

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heard my friend boasting of how he had brought a rich American to the Dauria — this officer — and how he paid double fare in Imperial rubles without any complaint. Not knowing what was the right fare, and not knowing that Imperials are worth thrice the money now in this city prove him to be a stranger. That he was an American, my friend is sure, for he was in Vladivostok last month and smuggled opium in here for the Chinese when he came up by the train. Why, he even knows the Americans so well that he speaks American. He cannot be fooled — he got rich in Vladivostok changing money for Americans.”

“But does the American seek us?” urged Katerin. She was anxious to establish the fact that the American had come to help them escape the Ataman.

“I heard nothing of that, mistress,” replied Ilya.

Michael pondered the matter carefully.

“It all means no good for us,” he said finally. “This officer may have sent Ilya to us, but why was Ilya shot? I say it looks like a trap.”

“But Zorogoff’s spies may have known that the American sent Ilya, and may have killed Ilya so no word could go back from us,” said Katerin.

“I grant that, yes,” said Michael, but still he had his doubts, and shook his head sadly.

“And if Zorogoff knows that an American officer has come, then the Ataman will not dare persecute us further. Did you hear the name of this American, Wassili?” asked Katerin.

“Mistress, I know nothing more. I did not dare go to the hotel when I heard that Ilya had been killed, but came back here for the orders of Excellence.”

“And that was right,” said Michael.

“Shall I go now to the American officer, master?” asked Wassili.

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"Let me think on it," said Michael. "They killed Ilya and they may also kill you. It is dangerous business and we must be cautious. If it is true that an American has come, then the Ataman will do one of two things — strike speedily or leave us in peace. I believe that he will destroy us. I wish my wits were equal to telling me what I should do."

"We must not leave it to the Ataman," declared Katerin. "The time has come for us to make our decisions — we it is who must act and not wait for the Ataman to make up his mind."

"We! What do you mean, my daughter? What is it we can do?"

"Do something before the Ataman returns."

"What? What is it we can do, surrounded as we are?"

There was a new look of determination in Katerin's face. "The time has come to be bold," she said. "If Zorogoff expects us to wait here for his will or his coming, we must surprise him — we must go straight to this American officer and ask him to help us to escape the city, even if he has not been sent to us by friends. But I'm sure we will find that he has been dispatched here to rescue us."

Michael put his hands to his face and stared at Katerin, aghast at her suggestion. He turned and sat down in his chair as if he had no strength to remain standing longer. "What in the name of God are you saying?" he whispered. "Do you mean we should put ourselves at the mercy of the Ataman?"

"Are we not now at the mercy of the Ataman? Are we not waiting for his men to knock at the door? How much worse off will we be if we make an attempt to reach this American?"

"And how much better?" asked Michael. "Will it do

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us more good to be shot down by the sentries as was Ilya than to remain here waiting for some turn of fortune which will save us?"

"Fortune has made the turn," replied Katerin. "What more do we ask than that an American officer be in the city?"

"But if we never reach the hotel? What good would a regiment of Americans do us if we are shot on the way?"

"We must take the chance and get to the hotel," declared Katerin. "Surely, you must see that it is better to risk ourselves for the short time necessary to get to the Dauria than to remain here and wait for certain doom."

"Madness!" exclaimed Michael. "What we would be going to would be death in the dark."

"We shall go by the first daylight, while the sentries are being changed in the streets," said Katerin quietly. It was plain that her mind was settled upon the thing.

Michael peered at her across the candle flame as if he doubted her sanity. But Katerin looked back at him without the slightest sign that she wavered in her determination to abandon the house.

"I see what you mean," said Michael sadly. "You prefer to die by bullets rather than by the poison. Perhaps it is the better way — and I shall go with you and we shall die together."

Katerin went to him and took up his hands. "I shall not cross the threshold of that Mongol's house alive, my father. I prefer to chance death — and if we fail — then we are with God and have died as Russians. It is better to die by the bullet of a soldier than by my own hand. Remember the threat of Zorogoff and consider my reasons for not fearing death."

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Michael gave the table a mighty thump with his fist. "Truth, by the Holy Saints!" he exclaimed. "But I am the one to make the attempt to get to the hotel — and find the American. I cannot see you walk into the streets with such wolves about."

"No," said Katerin, "I do not wish you to go alone. We shall go together — and if we must, we shall die together. But we cannot go against the designs of God — if the American officer has been sent to this city by friends to save us, we must not lose a minute in making ourselves known to him. The Ataman said he would come back — and he will come. He knows what I fear more than death. Very good. We must not wait here for him to come — It is not in us to lie hidden here like jackals in traps for the pleasure of the Mongol dog. We must flee with all possible speed toward the American."

"You are right," agreed Michael. "Zorogoff will lose no time if he learns of this American — and perhaps he knows of the stranger now. At least, as Wassili heard it, it must be common gossip in the city. So whatever Zorogoff plans against us he will accomplish without delay. But how are we to escape from the house? Are we to go out openly, as we are?"

"We shall escape through the servants' gate," said Katerin, her eyes on the candle as she planned. "It will be safer to wear the clothing of peasants. If there is a morning fog, it will help to conceal us. The greatest risk is in being seen as we get into the street. We cannot know how closely the house is being watched. But once clear and into the street, who is to think that two poor peasants are Michael Kirsakoff and his daughter — unless we should be stopped by soldiers and made to tell what our business is, where we came from, and who we are."

"True, that is the difficulty," said Michael. "But as

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you say, if we once get to the hotel, Slipitsky, the old Jew, if he is still alive, will take us to the American. Do you know if Slipitsky is still in charge of the Dauria, Wassili?"

"When I heard last, master, Slipitsky still lived," said the *moujik*. "Am I to go with the master and the mistress and do what I can to protect them?"

"No," said Katerin. "You would be recognized and betray our identity to observers. You are to stay here with the old woman, and if we die, you shall be rewarded for your loyalty. Bring us old boots — the worst you can find — and cabbages to carry in a bundle, that we may appear to be peasants come in from the country to market."

Wassili went out and at once Katerin began plans and preparations for their flight from the house. By the time the morning sun revealed a white fog over the landscape everything was in readiness. An old shawl had been filled with packets of rubles wrapped in old newspapers, and on top had been put her sable coat and other clothing. But before the shawl was tied up at the corners, three cabbages had been put in on top so that they showed through the openings.

The thick fog of morning gave promise that they could get away from the house without being observed, unless there were sentries close by the servants' gate.

When they were ready to depart, Michael put on the ancient gray coat — that one which was padded with paper rubles. He belted the shabby garment about him with an old rope and dropped his pistol into a side pocket. A dirty old sheepskin cap covered his head and a long muffler was wound about his neck, the ends trailing over his back. With the muffler pulled up over his face he could see through the mesh of the fabric, but his face was concealed. He also carried a short-stocked whip with a

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dozen lashes, such as the farmers carry with them. In such attire it was hard to believe that he had been a general of the Czar and once Governor — now he was but a bent old *moujik* who thought of nothing but his crops and what money he could get for the few provisions he was carrying into the city.

Katerin wrapped her head in an old shawl, tied a raggy towel across her nose against the cold, and drew the shawl down over her brow so that she peered out through a narrow slit. Her chin was concealed in the collar of a dirty and torn coat which had been mended with many faded patches. She wore a discarded pair of Wassili's boots, which had been retrieved from the wagon-shed, where they had been hung up to be used for hinges or pieces of leather for repairs. But she also took with her in the bundle her light shoes and her slippers.

When she finally picked up the bundle with the cabbages, she was a poor farmer's daughter come in from the plains to sell her cabbages and buy salt and candles in the bazaar — and say a prayer at the church.

Before they set out from the house Wassili was sent into the street and pottered about the casks at the small door in the wall to see whether the house was being closely watched. He came back soon and reported that he could see no one.

The old woman who had been doing the cooking stood crying and rubbing her eyes with her red hands as she saw the mistress ready to go forth and face the dangers of the city. She cried and prayed by turns, being sure that disaster awaited them both. Michael quieted her by a plentiful handful of rubles and an assurance that if they made to the hotel safely, she should be provided for before they escaped the city — but the old woman was disconsolate.

"God go with you, master and mistress," said Wassili,

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as he said farewell. He stood in the kitchen door and watched Michael and Katerin slip through the gate, bent on reaching the hotel and seeking the help of the American officer against the menace of Zorogoff.

XII

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MICHAEL trudged along stolidly through the dirty snow in the middle of the street, his head bent against the cold in peasant style. Katerin followed him, close behind, carrying the bundle which showed the cabbages.

Once away from the house they felt they had a chance of getting to the hotel without being halted if they did not appear too eager. So they proceeded without haste, plodding along as if weary after a long walk in from the plains. To any one who might watch them they were apparently heedless of their surroundings and concerned only with where their feet were to be planted for each step, but they were really watchful through the cloths which hid their faces. It was not possible to see more than a hundred yards in any direction, for the fog shut them in and helped to conceal them from observation.

They had not gone far before they made out the glow of a sentry-fire. Having planned carefully what they should do in various circumstances, they had no intention of attempting to avoid any soldiers, so Michael bore straight for the group about the fire. The soldiers looked up and scanned the approaching couple for a minute, then resumed their talk. Michael turned out just enough to pass them, lifted his head to stare at them through his muffler, gave them a gruff good-morning, and passed on. The four men about the fire supposed that the man and the woman must have passed through the outer cordons of sentries and given a satisfactory account of them-

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selves. So Katerin also walked past them with a friendly nod, and though she was nervous for a few minutes after she had turned her back on them, they said nothing.

As the two drew in toward the business section of the city they passed people who peered suspiciously at them. There were times when Michael feared that they were being followed, but in time the supposed followers turned up side streets and went about their business.

Then a band of roistering soldiers swarmed out of a *kabak* and bore down upon the father and daughter. The men were tipsy after a night of drinking and were singing wild songs and indulging in pranks among themselves. They hailed Michael with pleasantries but made way for him, and were respectfully silent when they passed Katerin, willing enough to let peasants go on without being molested. Had they known that the two "peasants" were General Kirsakoff and his daughter their attitude might have been entirely different.

Katerin struggled along, the great boots tiring her, for they were heavy and ill-fitting, and where the snow was packed hard at the street crossings, the boots slipped under her and with the heavy bundle she found it hard to walk. But she knew her father could not help her if they were to keep up the pretense that they were peasants. But Michael slowed his pace at times to let Katerin come up with him.

They reached the church, and stopped before it a few minutes to rest. They prayed and crossed themselves and lingered as long as they dared, for though they were both tired and cold, they hoped to get to the hotel before the fog was dispersed by the sun. They were fortunate that so few people were abroad.

"Have good heart," muttered Michael. "It is not far now to the hotel, and the roads will be better."

"The boots make me slow," whispered Katerin. "But

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do not think of me. Save your strength, for I can walk all day. And we must not appear to be in a hurry."

"It is plain that no one has suspected us," said Michael, peering back through the fog to make sure that they were not being trailed.

"The test will come at the hotel," said Katerin. "There we may encounter spies, so we must be most careful."

"It is too early for many officers of the Ataman to be about," said Michael. "But there is safety in boldness."

They went on. Soon they passed the ruin of the great house which had been their home in the years while Michael was Governor. Only one wall stood, black and charred and penciled with white in crevices of the timbers where the powdered snow had sifted in. The vacant windows yawned upon them, showing a dismal background of drifting fog. In that house they had lived as rulers of the Valley of Despair.

In time they came to the upper end of the Sofistkaya where a road turned off to the prison on the hill. They moved down past the big store which had been looted thoroughly by the Bolsheviki and the exiles who had been freed from the prison after the fall of the throne. The great windows along the street were boarded up, and a pair of Japanese sentries stood by the entrance. From the roof flew a red and white flag which marked the headquarters of the Japanese commander.

Next they passed the wrecked bank. It was there that Michael's partner had been slain while attempting to save what was left of the bank's money after the first big raid. The windows were also boarded, so that in case of another uprising by revolutionists the building could not be used as a rifle-nest for snipers.

Now there were more people in the streets. But every one was going about his business and paid little attention

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to Michael and Katerin. Such soldiers as they saw ignored them. They reached the bridge over the Ingoda, and now could see the front of the Dauria, not far ahead. They soon gained a position on the street opposite the entrance to the hotel, and crossed in the middle of the street after the manner of people from the country. Michael paused before the door, and waited for Katerin to come up with him.

"This is the place," said Michael gruffly, and then he pushed open the door. He was afraid that there might be a group of people inside, but his fears were relieved at finding a sleepy-eyed youth drowsing by a fire-reddened stove on a bench.

Once through the door, Katerin let her bundle drop to the floor. It was so warm inside that she began to worry lest they be expected to uncover their faces, and in that case, if they did not find Slipitsky at once, they might be recognized by some casual passer-by who would carry the news of their arrival at the hotel to some of Zorogoff's spies.

The youth by the fire roused himself reluctantly and gave an angry look at the intruders. It was plain he felt that people so poorly dressed had no business in the hotel. He eyed the bundle which Katerin had put down, and then motioned them out of the door with an angry gesture.

"Get away with your cabbages!" he snarled. "This is no public place where people can warm themselves. This is the best hotel in the city and only for rich people."

Michael bowed abjectly. "I have come to pay to Mr. Slipitsky money which I owe him."

The youth stared the harder. The heat from the stove was oppressive after the cold of the streets, but Michael and Katerin made no move to uncover their faces.

"You can give me the money," said the youth, holding out his hand, though he did not rise from the bench.

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“Slipitsky is not here and if he were, he would have no time to bother with you. Come! Hand the money to me and get out!”

“Slipitsky not here?” demanded Michael. “But he told me to come. You mean that he has gone away?”

“I said he is not here,” said the youth curtly. “I have other things to do besides answer questions. I’ll take the money.”

“No, no,” said Michael. “Mr. Slipitsky must sign the paper if I pay him the money — it is always so. I do not know who you are. I must see Mr. Slipitsky, I tell you.”

The youth got to his feet and looked closely at Michael, as if suspicious of his purpose. He had probably been shrewd enough to understand that Michael did not talk wholly as a peasant. Having scrutinized Michael, he turned and looked at Katerin, but she ignored his gaze and looked about the walls at the dirty old posters with pictures of Russian ships.

“Go away!” said the youth finally. “I can’t be troubled. This is no time to come asking for Mr. Slipitsky.”

“But I have come twenty versts this morning to see Mr. Slipitsky and give him the money and I must get back to my cow,” insisted Michael, seeing that he was making an impression on the youth despite the latter’s show of contempt. “And if I have to go back to my house, it will be two months again before I can pay ——”

A black figure appeared at the top of the stairs while Michael was talking, and called down sharply, “Dazo! What are you doing? Who is there?”

“I don’t know who it is,” said Dazo. “Some fools in from the country who have lost their way and ——”

“And is it a grand ball or something you are having down there with all this talk I hear, till I can’t do any-

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thing with my figures?" demanded the one above wrathfully. "Who is it come to talk with you so early in the morning? Maybe some rich gentleman from Moscow, eh?"

Michael now recognized the person above as Slipitsky, and knowing that they were safe at last, called out, "Mr. Slipitsky, I have come to pay you the money I owe to you."

Slipitsky leaned forward and peered down the stairs. "What! Somebody would be paying me money and that stupid goat of a Dazo does not know what is wanted. Dazo! Is it money you would let slip away from me in these times? Oy! A poor man you would make of me, stupid one! Tell the gentleman to come up."

But Michael did not wait to be urged by Dazo to go up. He started at once, and Katerin picked up the bundle and followed. Slipitsky remained standing in the dim light of the upper hall at the head of the stairs, peering down, and as Michael drew near the top, waved him forward. "Come this way to my office, please. And you — Dazo! Keep the door shut or I shall be beggared with buying wood from the Buriats. It is the house we wish to warm, and not all of Chita."

Slipitsky trotted ahead of Michael and led the way into a tiny room. By the time Michael entered, the old Jew was standing behind a desk.

"You have come to pay me money?" he demanded when Katerin had entered the room. "Who is it, I ask?" he added, suspicious now because Michael had not uncovered his face.

Slipitsky was old and bent himself, with long black whiskers, a grave and wrinkled face, small black eyes that seemed to grasp what they looked at. He wore a round black cap on his head, and about his shoulders was a long black cape tied in at the middle with a green cord which

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had ended its usefulness as a curtain cord. His brow was furrowed, and he had no teeth that were visible, but his face had a benevolent expression as if he found it hard to be stern with people. There was something about his manner as he stood behind the desk which suggested a teacher. A wrinkled little smile lurked about his eyes — a ghost of a smile which had dissipated perhaps under the cruel times that had come. His breath smelled of boiled onions and the same odor pervaded the close little room.

"Who is it, I ask?" repeated Slipitsky when Michael made no answer but turned to close the door behind Katerin. The old Jew was on his guard at once, for he knew these muffled figures might be robbers or secret police sent by Zorogoff to arrest him.

"We have come to have a talk with you privately," whispered Michael. Slipitsky's face was instantly screwed up with terror, and his jaw dropped. For an instant he was in something of a panic and he drew back into a corner, for he knew that no rude peasant would speak so correctly as had this stranger before him. And whispers always meant secrecy if not imminent danger.

"You are not peasants!" mumbled Slipitsky. "You have come in here by a trick! You do not speak now as peasants! Who has sent you here to make trouble for me in my house?"

Michael whipped the muffler down from his face by way of answer and thrust his face forward into the light from the frosted window so that Slipitsky might recognize him without further talk.

"Prophets of Israel!" cried the Jew, suddenly relieved of his worry as he recognized Michael. "You are dead!"

"Not yet, by the kindness of God," whispered Michael, and turning to his daughter, said, "Also Katerin Steph-anovna has come with me. You must hide us both, for

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we are beset by the Ataman and have fled away from our house to save our lives."

"True enough, it is Michael Alexandrovitch, his Excellence who was Governor!" whispered Slipitsky as if assuring himself that he was not deceived by his eyes. He clapped his hands over his ears. "It was said that you were both dead! Four months ago I heard you had been killed! Is it that you have risen from the dead by a miracle, my old friends? By the patriarchs! This is a sight for me! Both of you — and dressed in poor rags like serfs come in from a farm to sell butter!"

Katerin had exposed her face and smiled joyfully at the old Jew.

"Take care or you will be heard speaking to us and we shall be betrayed," warned Michael. "No one must know we are here, or Zorogoff comes ——"

"Enough!" cried Slipitsky, and ran out from behind his desk, keys jangling in his pockets, and shot the bolt on the door. "As you say, the place is like a beehive with spies," he whispered, turning back to Michael. "That rascal, Dazo, below stairs is one of Zorogoff's men, I know! The Cossacks made me make a place for him there at the door to watch — but I know he is an underground for the Ataman!"

"Then we shall be delivered," said Michael, pulling up his muffler over his face again. "If it be already known to him that we are here ——"

"We must fool him," said Slipitsky. "What is the good of having a head if we do not use it? You must go out again and ——"

"But where shall we stay?" demanded Michael, alarmed at the Jew's saying they must go. To be turned into the streets again meant certain capture by soldiers of the Ataman.

"Please, you must hide us for our lives!" pleaded

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Katerin. "If you do not hide us somewhere we shall be killed!"

"We shall all be killed!" exclaimed Slipitsky. "Take off your covering and let me see your face again, mistress! Ah, yes, it is you! Can you doubt that I will not do what I can for old friends? Be patient."

"Then we can stay?" asked Katerin. "But what of the spy below? Will he not reveal us?"

"We are desperate," urged Michael. "Zorogoff has given us the mental torture — if he finds us again he will take my daughter to his palace to ——"

"Toosh!" exploded Slipitsky. "Zorogoff is not to find you. I have known persecution in my day — who of my people have not? And in your time you were good to some of my friends. Ah, I never forget, my friend! I will hide you well. But if Zorogoff knows, then we are all dead together — as dead as the prophets! That Ataman is a robber, Excellence! Every week I must pay him money till I am beggared. Taxes, he calls it! Is the last kopeck from a poor man taxes, I ask? And every name that goes in the book he watches, for fear I would have a stranger under my roof who might be a spy against him! And that dog of a Dazo is his eyes. But we must fool Dazo, as you shall see."

"He will know if we do not go away again," said Katerin. "How are we to fool him on that?"

"Toosh! Who is to suspect that the two peasants who came this morning to pay me money were his Excellence the General and his daughter? It is how you get out again, as Dazo sees it, that gives me troubles. But I shall put you in rooms and no names in the book for the spies. So we must fool that stupid one below. Wait here for me, Excellence."

The Jew unbolted the door with cautious fingers and looked down the hall. Then he went out and closed the

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door after him to look down the stairs. He saw Dazo lying on the bench, his back to the stove, apparently napping.

"Dazo!" yelled Slipitsky frantically, at the same time beginning a wild caper like a dance, "Dazo! Stop the two — the old man and the woman with the cabbages! Stop them I say, or I am ruined for twenty rubles! Oh, oh, oh!"

Dazo rolled off the bench and sat up, staring about him in bewilderment, startled out of a sound doze by the screams of Slipitsky.

"What is the trouble?" called the youth. "What has happened now?"

"Enough has happened!" cried Slipitsky. "The two peasants who came in with the cabbages to pay me money! Stop them! Oh, I am ruined!"

"But I saw no one!" cried Dazo. "I tell you no one has come in or gone out from this place while ——"

"Stop the talk and run!" screamed Slipitsky, wringing his hands in agony. "I signed the receipt but the rubles they gave me were bad! Twenty rubles, I say, I lose! They just went out the door while you were dreaming of the wife you beat in Irkutsk! They just went out the door! Run for them and drag them back by their hair! Run, run — hurry!"

"You are crazy," muttered Dazo, but he reached for his coat to the wooden hook on the wall, not sure now that the two strangers had not evaded him while he was asleep.

"I am crazy for my twenty rubles!" raged Slipitsky, and Dazo pulled on his coat and dashed into the street.

Slipitsky ran back to his little office and let himself in.

"Come!" he commanded. "I will put you in rooms, now that I have sent that fool of a Dazo down the Sofistkaya looking for you."

Michael and Katerin followed him down the long hall.

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The Jew put a big brass key into a door, and, turning the lock, thrust Michael into the room and handed him the key. "Keep quiet till I come with food, and if any one knocks do not answer. We have fooled that fox of a Dazo, and we shall fool the Ataman!"

And the old Jew put his fingers to his lips against the thanks which Michael and Katerin would have expressed, slipped out through the door and was gone, wailing through the hall about the fictitious twenty rubles which he had lost by the carelessness of Dazo, the spy.

XIII

KATERIN PLANS TO MEET THE AMERICAN

SLIPITSKY returned to the Kirsakoffs in an hour, bringing with him a small samovar, some bread, and a cold partridge. In his pocket he carried a bottle of wine for Michael.

"You will need something to warm and hearten you, Excellence, for there is not much warmth," he said when Katerin had let him in.

Michael was sitting on the bed, his boots off and his eyes blinking, for he had been sleeping, being worn out with waiting up for the return of Wassili the night before, the preparation for the flight, and the journey afoot into the city.

"Ah, that is good!" said Michael. "I am famished, though I have had a good sleep — without bad dreams, for now we are out of danger, old friend."

Slipitsky turned and looked at him in surprise. "Out of danger! Do not think my hotel is so safe, Excellence. Zorogoff may ask for all my rooms any day for more of his officers — and when he takes the notion he searches the place. So you are still in danger — unless you have a plan for escape from the city. Surely you and the daughter must have some scheme for getting out by an underground!"

"Oh, true!" said Michael, taking a glass of wine from Katerin's hand. "That is why we have come — there is an American here?"

"Friends have sent an American officer to us," ex-

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plained Katerin to the Jew. "Is he not here in the house?"

"So-o!" whispered Slipitsky, betraying his amazement. "It is you he has come for? And that is why so little has been seen of him! Two nights he has been under the roof and he has not stirred out, but sits all day smoking by a samovar! I have seen him in the hall once — a big fellow, maybe a colonel! And he has paid a week in advance, too, but I could not read what he wrote in the book for Dazo. So he got word to you that he was here — well, that is good for you."

"We have heard that he was in the city looking for us," said Michael. "But we are not sure — we must look into the matter. But I doubt if Zorogoff will dare interfere with an American — or us if the American has come to help us."

Slipitsky sat down and pulled his beard thoughtfully while Katerin busied herself with brewing the tea at the samovar.

"It is hard for us to tell what that devil of an Ataman will do with anybody," said Slipitsky. "But an American — that is different. So your friends have done this for you! And the American has sent word to you that he is here waiting for you, eh?"

"We heard it through Ilya Andreitch, a peasant, who came to our house last night with the news," explained Katerin. "But when Ilya was sent here with a message last night he was killed. But the American did not tell Ilya to go to us — Ilya got news from friends of his."

Slipitsky opened his eyes at that, and rolled them thoughtfully. "Then the American did not send the word to you by Ilya?" He was puzzled — and troubled again. "And Ilya was shot? That is bad."

"We shall have to be very cautious about it," put in Michael, "for I am afraid of a trap."

KATERIN PLANS TO MEET THE AMERICAN

"Ilya got the news from Rimsky, an old cigarette-seller," said Katerin.

"What!" exclaimed Slipitsky. "From that old liar? He will say anything for ten kopecks. What does he know about our American? Rimsky has not been here to see him. I tell you, there is something wrong about this — it may be that Rimsky is a spy."

"Ah, yes!" said Michael, frowning thoughtfully. "What if Rimsky is a spy, as you say, and Ilya was fooled about the American's having come for us? That is what I said from the first!"

"But it may be that the American asked Rimsky about us before he came to the hotel at all," said Katerin. "And perhaps Rimsky gave the news to poor Ilya, and perhaps the news was truth. Then would it not be right?"

"I would like to see something that is right if Rimsky has had a hand in it," grumbled Slipitsky, who was getting more worried as he considered the matter. He was reluctant to ask too many questions, for he supposed there might be angles to the situation which the Kirsakoffs would prefer not to discuss.

But Katerin was becoming alarmed by Slipitsky's doubts. She realized well enough that there had never been any proof beyond Ilya's word that the American had come seeking them, and that Ilya himself had been dependent upon what Rimsky had said. But she did feel that there was protection of some kind for them in the bare fact that an American was under the same roof with them now, and that Zorogoff might not dare persecute them openly or take them from the hotel. She was determined to appeal to the American, but she wanted time to make her own plans. What she feared now was that Slipitsky, by his suspicions and doubts, would put her father back into his mood of dejection and discouragement.

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ment. So she laughed gayly and served her father with tea and the cold partridge.

"I shall find some way of talking with the American," she declared to Slipitsky. "You must help me in some plan."

"I can go to him and tell him that I know where the Kirsakoffs may be found," suggested the Jew. "He will tell me, I think, at once, if he seeks you or not."

"I am not so sure," said Katerin. "He may not want to discuss a secret with you — he will be suspicious of any person who talks with him about us, if he is trying to find us unbeknownst to others in the city. He might deny that he seeks us, and thus we should be deprived of his help."

"True," said Slipitsky. "The owl says little but thinks much, so what he knows is his own, which is wisdom. We need not fear the American — I wish there were more of them here. But this old fox of a Rimsky! It would be well to know what he is at."

"No," said Michael. "You cannot go running to a stranger and saying you know where we are hidden. And we cannot go to him and make ourselves known till we know for sure that he is seeking us. The matter will have to be arranged with more care."

"Yes, Excellence, the wolf knows the forest and its ways," said the Jew. "We must be wise about it, for there is no tax on wisdom. It would be well for me to bring Rimsky to the house and question him about what he knows — and what he said to Ilya."

"You say you do not trust Rimsky," said Katerin. "You say he is a liar — and may be a spy for the Ataman. Even if the American asked Rimsky about us, Rimsky might lie about it — and even if he tells the truth, whatever he says we will mistrust it. And we must be careful that we do not set his tongue wagging in the city."

KATERIN PLANS TO MEET THE AMERICAN

Till we have thought more about it, we must be most cautious."

"Then shall I ask the American about it, mistress?" asked the Jew.

"No, thank you — I shall go and see the American myself."

"See the American yourself!" gasped Michael in astonishment.

"Yes, I shall see him," replied Katerin calmly. "That is the simplest and best way to learn what we want to know."

"That is sensible," agreed Slipitsky.

"You mean that you will go and tell him who you are?" demanded Michael, his horror intensifying at the idea the more he realized that Katerin meant what she was saying.

"He may know who I am when he sees me," said Katerin.

"It must not be done, my daughter," said Michael, his agitation only growing. "We can trust no one, especially not a strange man who comes from whom we know not. This is no time to be rash, and I cannot let you put yourself into danger."

"If this American has come seeking Michael Kirsakoff and his daughter, will he not have descriptions of us? And if he is not seeking us, how is he to know who I am? I shall not tell him my name, you may be assured of that, unless he knows me — or unless he tells me that he seeks us. So what can the danger be, my father?"

"There is some truth in what you say," admitted Michael, as he resumed eating the partridge. "If he knows you, he knows, and that would mean he has come from friends. But if he does not recognize you, and he does not tell you that he is seeking us, what have you learned? And how are you to go talking with a man you

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do not know? I tell you you must not take risks on what Ilya has said!"

"That is wisdom," assented the Jew, nodding his head slowly. "You must always test the ice before you walk upon it, else you will find yourself in the river with the fish."

"Tell me, where is the room of the American?" asked Katerin.

"The other way — down at the end of the hall with windows that look up the Sofistkaya, mistress."

"Can you put us in rooms near him?"

"Yes, mistress, I could. When Dazo goes out later in the day, it can be accomplished secretly. Is it that you intend to watch the American? You will see little of him if he keeps to his room as he has."

"What good would it do us to watch him?" asked Michael. "It would tell us nothing to see him going and coming."

"No," said Katerin. "But I wish to be near him for protection in case the Ataman's officers come here. Now, have you a servant for us who can be trusted not to talk about us?"

"Yes, mistress — a sister of my cousin. She waits upon some of the Ataman's officers who live in the house. It is she who will bring you your samovars and your food. She is safe — not too much sense and little to say to any one."

"Then this is my plan," said Katerin. "If you will contrive to put us near the American officer, the next thing will be to take care that when the American rings for a samovar the girl does not take it to him, but brings it to us. And I shall carry the samovar to him. He, thinking I am but a samovar girl, may talk with me and I may learn if he seeks among the people of the city for a man by the name of Kirsakoff."

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"A Kirsakoff a servant! You, Katerin Stephanovna, a samovar girl in this hotel! How can you think of such a thing?" cried Michael.

Katerin laughed merrily and tossed her head, already in a mood for the plan which she had evolved. "I would not be a samovar girl because I play at it, my father," she said. "What is it but fun? Who can help the Kirsakoffs better than God and themselves?"

"But I say you are not to be a servant!" objected Michael.

"Better a living servant than a dead aristocrat," replied Katerin. "What harm can come of it? Is it not wise to be known here as a servant? We have come here as peasants and wish to be known as such for safety. Look at my old black dress! I have on my slippers — see — and I can let down my hair. How will an American know that I am not a samovar girl — unless, as we have said, he recognizes me at once as a Kirsakoff? And I can talk with him, perhaps. He will not be afraid of saying things to a girl who is a servant which he would keep from others."

"And what then?" asked Michael with a frown. "Do you think that this American is going about telling his secret business to any samovar girl? Fi! You must take him for a fool before you have seen him!"

"I am afraid that he will know you are not a servant, if I am allowed to say my opinion, mistress," said the Jew dolefully.

"But he is an American," persisted Katerin. "He probably knows little Russian. But what I wish to learn at once is whether he will know me for a Kirsakoff. And if he does not recognize me, and yet sees that I am not of the servant class, all the more reason why he should suspect that I might know the Kirsakoffs. So he might ask me if I know them. Why should he not ask a samovar

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girl, when he has asked old Rimsky for General Kirsakoff? Do you think I will only take his food to him and then run away without a word?"

"And what else can you do?" asked her father.

"I shall talk to him — of the weather, and the troubles that have come upon the people. And if he does not tell me why he has come to Chita, I shall try and learn it from him. Can he speak Russian, do you know, Mr. Slipitsky?"

"He must speak a little," said the Jew. "He is alone, and he has made his way about. He talked with Dazo, who knows nothing but Russian, the stupid ox. But the American wrote in the book in English and I could make nothing of it — just a scrawl."

"Then he will be able to talk a little with me," said Katerin. "At least, enough so that I may gain his confidence and be able to talk with him in a way of gossip about General Kirsakoff who was Governor here."

"By the Prophets!" said Slipitsky. "The mistress Katerin Stephanovna should be in the secret police, Excellence! It is all a good plan, and the mistress should be allowed to have her way in it."

"I wish there were some other way to go about it than this business of being a samovar girl," said Michael as he lighted a cigarette. "We shall know how wise it all is when we see what we shall learn by it. But I shall not prevent its being done, for we are in danger enough, and making danger for you, my friend."

"Think not of my danger," said the Jew.

"Then I shall do it," said Katerin. "We cannot delay, and we cannot take outsiders, like this man Rimsky, into our confidence. Our safety now depends upon keeping secret where we are, and upon making the best of such time as we have. Who knows when the Ataman will learn where we have gone from the house? And you

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shall be well paid for your help, Mr. Slipitsky, and for what you have done."

"Ah, it is not for money," said the Jew. "When are you to begin as samovar girl, mistress? I must make the arrangements and be sure that everything is ready."

"The morning is the best time for me to go to the American," said Katerin. "I shall take his morning samovar to him, the girl bringing it to me first. And I shall go on serving him till I have learned what I need. And if he should not tell me before he is to leave the city, I shall tell him that we wish to escape the city under his protection. Surely, we need not be afraid of an American!"

"No," agreed Michael. "He cannot be from enemies if he is not from friends. But it is best to learn what we can first, and you must have a good rest before you begin a battle of wits."

The Jew left them again, and later in the day he put Michael and Katerin into two rooms next to the room in which Peter was resting and planning how he should deal with Michael Kirsakoff if he could be found in Chita.

XIV

THE SAMOVAR GIRL

IT was nine o'clock by his wrist-watch when Peter got out of bed that morning. From what he could see of the city through the frosted windows, it was a cold gray day, with the position of the sun above the ridge of hills marked by a yellow blotch through the scattering fog.

The room was cold and he dressed rapidly. He rang at once for a samovar, and began shaving. He had made up his mind to make definite efforts this day to trace Michael Kirsakoff, for he was now rested from his journey on the train. He thought of Rimsky. It might be wise to go in and see the graybeard again, and pick up once more the conversation and the gossip. In time Rimsky would be willing to talk more freely, Peter was sure.

The samovar girl was slower than usual in coming. Peter rang again — three times, and with as much insistence as he could put into the pressure of the button. He finished shaving, and had a mind to go out to the dreary dining room and see what could be done about getting some hot tea there. It was apparent that the stupid and slatternly girl who had been serving him could not be depended upon for prompt service — and he was beginning to suffer from the cold.

When he had decided that he should wait no longer, there came a knock at the door. He opened it — and stared! For instead of the peasant girl who had been serving him since his arrival at the hotel, there was a tall young woman with a beautiful face — a patrician face,

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the face of a woman of noble lineage! And he was startled, though he was too well trained in his business to reveal his amazement to her. Still, he paused for an instant, not sure that she had not mistaken the room and had not come in response to his ringing. He looked at her over the top of the big brass samovar which she bore on a tray before her, and her keenly intelligent blue eyes met his with a self-possessed and frank gaze. He half expected her to mutter some apology and go away. Instead, she stood gazing at him, waiting for him to make way for her, and the trace of a smile came into her eyes, as if she felt like saying to him, "Here is your samovar! How do you expect to get it if you stand all morning in the doorway?"

Peter bowed slightly, and said good-morning with an effort to be casual. In the second which he had stood stock still looking at her, a suspicion had crossed his mind — this well-born woman had not taken the place of his unkempt serving girl without good reason. It was quite possible, and quite in the Russian style, to send an attractive woman to serve him and spy upon him. Very well! He decided that he should play a little at that game himself.

"Good-morning, master," Katerin replied modestly, and came through the door when Peter stepped aside to admit her. She smiled as a matter of duty, and went about her business of placing the samovar and the breakfast things on the table.

Peter went before the big mirror on the wall between the windows and pretended to be combing his hair. He wished to conceal from the new samovar girl his close observation of her, and he could watch her image in the mirror without appearing to pay any special attention to her.

Katerin wore her old black dress. Peter knew at once

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that it was not a cast-off garment such as might be given to a serving girl by a woman of the upper class — it was obviously her own garment, cut and made especially for her. Though the material was old, he knew it for fine stuff, probably imported. A real American might have been deceived into the belief that this woman was nothing but a servant; Peter, however, knew that such a delicate face, such fine features, such a carriage of a proud head were to be found only among the nobility of his native country. If she had been sent to watch him, he knew that whoever had sent her could not know that he was a native Russian — it was presumed that he was an American so unfamiliar with Russia as to be easily misled.

He smiled as he watched her. She handled the crude dishes as if they were of the most fragile china or of fine glass. She put down the heavy blue sugar-urn gently; she transferred the tea-glass, which was made from the bottom of a bottle, from the tray to the table with infinite care. She laid out the old brass spoon beside the heavy plate on the dingy cloth as if instead of being brass it were of the finest silver.

He noted her hands. The fingers were slender — and clean. The nails were polished. Her black hair, braided down her back and tied with a bit of velvet black ribbon, had a sheen which indicated the care which had been given to it. And the low collar of her gown revealed the fine texture of her skin.

Having arranged the dishes on the table, Katerin stood with her back to Peter, hands on hips and watching the teapot atop the samovar. This was all in startling contrast to the abrupt manner of the other girl, who had dumped the things down upon the table and departed. This new girl seemed suspiciously solicitous about the comfort of the American — and was possessed of plenty of time for lingering in the rooms of guests!

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Peter walked to the table, and sat down with his back to the window. She remained standing before the samovar in thoughtful attitude, disregarding him. He saw that her face showed traces of strain — a pallor which was not natural to her skin and a gauntness about her eyes which gave her a sad and melancholy expression. Presently she picked up the blue sugar-urn as if to put it better within his reach.

“Ah!” said Peter, rubbing his hands and smiling up at her. “On cold mornings like this one the song of the samovar makes pretty music in our ears!”

It was an old saying of his father’s — and Peter spoke the Russian words with casual rapidity, for he wanted to see what she would think of him — an American who spoke Russian as only one born under the Czar could speak it.

The sugar-urn slipped from Katerin’s fingers and crashed down upon the metal tray, spilling the sugar. And he heard her give a startled gasp. A look of utter astonishment came into her face and she gave him a frightened stare. The Russian words had put her into a swift panic — she was more than astonished — she was actually alarmed at hearing her own language flow so freely from the lips of a man she supposed to be an American.

“Have I frightened you?” he asked, looking at her with feigned concern, and speaking gently. “Do you fear the sound of your own language?”

“You are Russian,” she said simply, but with the faintest trace of a question in the words.

“Oh, no, I am an American,” he replied easily. “True, I am of Russian blood.” He smiled at her, and she looked away from him swiftly, renewing her efforts to save the sugar which had been spilled from being wet in the bottom of the tray. He saw her fine white skin show a sudden flush of color that rose from her throat

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and mounted slowly to her cheeks, tinting the pale skin under her eyes. He thought now that she was more beautiful than he had at first realized.

"Is it because I am Russian that you show fear?" he went on.

She tossed her head a trifle, as if in defiance. "I do not fear you," she said lightly, and gave him a shy smile.

"I would be sorry if you did."

"It is very pleasant — that we may speak to each other and understand. I was surprised — yes. Now, there is your sugar, and I must go."

"No, please!" he objected as she turned as if to go to the door. "Everybody is surprised to hear the American officer speak real Russian, but no one stops to talk with me — and I am hungry for talk — talk in Russian. I have only just come, and the other girl would say only, 'Yes, master' and 'No, master,' and run away frightened, just as you are about to do."

"But I am not frightened," she said, pretending to bother with the teapot on the top of the samovar.

"But just now, at hearing your own language, you dropped the sugar dish. Is it not true?"

Peter was joking her now in an effort to get on friendly terms with her. But she still appeared a bit distraught, as if she had not yet recovered from the shock of hearing a foreigner speaking the Czar's Russian.

"Yes, I was startled," admitted Katerin, and now smiled at him frankly, though she gave him a searching look — the silver bars on his shoulders, the buttons of his blouse, the circle of brown tape at the cuffs of his tunic. "And you would be surprised, American, if a samovar girl should speak to you in perfect English."

"Probably I should," said Peter. "As it was, you surprised me this morning — I was expecting the other girl to come."

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She said nothing to that. She realized now that it would be foolish to expect him to think of her as of the servant class, and had already given up all ideas of making a pretense.

And as for Peter, he was beginning to abandon his theory that she was a spy. There was probably some other reason for her being a servant. He was chiefly concerned now with making her a friend, for the thought crossed his mind that this girl might be able to give him information about Kirsakoff, though the subject of the former Governor would have to be approached with great caution.

"The other girl could not come this morning," she said. "But I shall not always bring your samovar — my work is on the other floors."

"I hope you will, though it is too bad that you have to work as a samovar girl." This was direct angling for enlightenment as to why she was serving as a samovar girl — he wanted to give her a chance to set herself right with him. If she did happen to be a spy, it would make it easy for her to improvise a history for herself and so find it easy to talk with him and deflect his suspicions — if she thought he was suspicious of her true status. He knew it was quite possible that she was a refugee who had turned "worker" for protection against the wrath of the masses toward the wealthy.

"People once rich are now poor," said Katerin, and looked at him significantly. She was hoping that he might take this hint, and by a closer scrutiny, recognize her as Kirsakoff's daughter. In that case, he would make it known to her that he had come from friends to find her and her father. But, as a matter of fact, Peter had forgotten that Kirsakoff had a daughter — except for a little girl.

"And it is necessary now that you work?" he asked.

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"It is most necessary. I must have food and shelter by some method."

"You are working here — as a samovar girl — for food and shelter? Is it as bad as that with you?"

"Why not I as well as others?" she asked simply, with a shrug of her shoulders. "And others have fared worse. What better could I do while I wait — for friends — to send help to me — and my people?"

Once more she gave him that steady gaze which she thought would add meaning to her words, but though his face was serious, not a glimmer of understanding did she see in his eyes. She thought it strange that if he had been sent to rescue her father and herself he could not grasp the meaning behind her words and her glances. Surely, he would have been shown a picture of her, or have a description of her from friends which would cause him to recognize the daughter of Michael Kirsakoff easily. There were not so many young women of her age, education, and appearance in Chita, she knew.

She turned her eyes from his, and colored again, embarrassed by having looked so long and steadily into the eyes of a stranger. She drew him a glass full of hot water from the samovar for a fresh glass of tea and by this means covered her sense of having appeared too bold with a strange man.

"So you are waiting for help to come to you, eh?" asked Peter. He pitied her — yet he was still reserving his judgment about her. It was possible that her story was only to mislead him as to her real motive in bringing the samovar to his room.

Katerin smiled sadly. "Yes, I wait for a chance to get away from the city. We have sent letters to friends in Harbin and in Vladivostok — weeks ago, months ago. We are not sure that they got the letters, for we have had no answer. Yet we hope some one will come to help us.

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Perhaps — *they will send some one to us,*” she added with special significance and looked at him again with intent eyes.

Peter was puzzled now. He saw that she was trying to make him understand something without putting it into words — it might be that she was seeking to learn for some other person what his object was in coming to Chita. Or he had been mistaken for some other person who was expected.

“Why do you not go to Vladivostok yourself?” he asked, evading saying anything that bore upon what he was thinking. “The trains are running. Is it lack of money that prevents you from going?”

“No, not money,” she said, and then with a glance at the door, she lowered her voice to almost a whisper. “Do you not know about the Ataman Zorogoff who is in this city?”

“Yes, I have heard of him. I hope to know more about him. The Americans want to help the people. Perhaps you will tell me about Zorogoff.”

Peter thought that was enough for him to say about Zorogoff. He did not care to commit himself on the subject of the Ataman — did not wish to betray any antagonism toward the Mongol ruler. The Ataman was a man to be wary about, and Peter had no intention of taking this girl into his confidence as to where he might stand in any matter which involved Zorogoff.

Katerin suddenly clenched her hands. “Do the Americans think they can help us if they remain in Vladivostok?” she demanded with passion. Then she lapsed back into her easy manner as suddenly as she had blurted out her feelings, and turned as if she would go.

“Please wait!” he commanded. “This is something that it would be well for me to know.” Then dropping his voice as she paused and looked back at him over her

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shoulder, he went on, "You mean that the people are oppressed by the Ataman Zorogoff?"

She returned and stood before the samovar, as if settling in her mind what her answer should be.

"I think I had better not talk about the Ataman," she said finally. "He is not a safe subject for discussion by a poor and helpless samovar girl."

"Tell me," he urged, bending forward and speaking confidentially, "are you in danger from the Ataman?"

She gave him that quick look again, as if she were not quite sure that he could be trusted. "It is better for me not to talk of the Ataman — but I am a samovar girl here for my own safety — till some one comes for me — *and my father.*"

Once more he understood that he was to get some meaning from her words. He noticed that a sudden change had come over her — there was a softer look in her eyes, as if she had abandoned all thought of using any artifice with him and was on the verge of giving him her confidence. Her eyes seemed to burn with a kindlier light for him.

Peter was right about Katerin. She was at that time strongly tempted to tell him who she was. She watched him with a quivering expectancy, waiting for him to whisper to her that he was the man who had been sent by her friends to find her and Michael Kirsakoff. But when he said nothing and observed her without any sign that he had comprehended her meaning in words or looks, she felt a fear that perhaps she had gone too far in her attempts to enlighten him as to her identity.

"Do you live here — in Chita?" he asked. It was in his mind that this was a good time to test her as to whether she might have any knowledge of Kirsakoff. He realized that if she had her home in Chita, she was of the class who would know the former Governor.

Katerin's lips moved as if to reply, but she did not.

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she had recovered her caution. She wanted to evade the answer, for once more she had built up a mental resistance against him and was beginning to be afraid. She realized that if she pretended to be a stranger in the city she would defeat his purpose if he had really come from friends, by misleading him. If she told him that she was a stranger in the city he would be thrown entirely off the track and never suspect that she was Katerin Stephanovna Kirsakoff.

"I have been in Chita long enough to know it well," she said. "And I have been here long enough to be willing to go, too."

"Then you have friends here," he said. "You must know many of the people — the wealthy people, that is."

"They are almost all gone — or dead. Most of them are in Vladivostok, or in hiding here. But we cannot get away now — it is impossible for us to leave by ourselves. We wait for our friends — *to send us help*." That should be plain enough for him, she thought.

"How would they send help?" he asked. "You mean that they would send soldiers?"

"Perhaps they would send a man who would be able to take us away from the city — they might even send a — foreigner. A man Zorogoff would not dare to hinder from going with us."

Peter now had full understanding of her searching looks, her broad hints about help, and her surprise at finding that he spoke perfect Russian though supposed to be an American. Also, he saw her reason for coming to him as a samovar girl — unless she was really a spy delving into his object for being in the city.

"I am sorry I have been so stupid," he said. "You must think I am a fool — but I am not a messenger sent by your friends."

Katerin was standing at the far end of the table from

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him, close by the door. He saw her turn pale, either with sudden fear of him, or great disappointment that she had revealed to him that she was expecting a messenger. She was calm enough, but he saw that his admission that he was not the expected messenger, chilled her with some unaccountable terror.

It was this that had terrified Katerin: This American now denied that he was seeking her father — but where had Ilya gotten the word that an American was hunting for Michael Kirsakoff? And this American was really a Russian! Could it be that instead of being a friend, or from friends, he was in reality an enemy? What could this man want with her father? she asked herself. He could not have come from friends, else he would have easily recognized her. And if he had asked Rimsky for the whereabouts of Michael Kirsakoff and was willing that the old cigarette-seller and Ilya Andreitch the pig-killing *moujik* should know that he was seeking Kirsakoff, why was he not willing that she should know of his quest? She saw that he was willing to ally himself with peasants but withheld the object of his coming to the city from aristocrats. She saw that she had failed in misleading him as to her class. He gave his secrets to peasants — thus he must be an enemy to her father and herself!

She laughed suddenly, as if all that had passed between them had been a joke. She must change her tactics and get his secret. She must not arouse his suspicions as to her identity now, but baffle him in every way, for if he were not a friend he must be a new menace to her and her father.

“Of course you are not the messenger,” she said, and returning to the samovar, took down the teapot, shook it swingingly and looked into it. Her face was flushed again under the excitement of what she had discovered about him. “Come! Have another glass of tea, please

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— *master!* ” She gave a joking twist to the last word, and threw back her head and laughed gayly.

“ But it is too bad if you have been expecting a messenger,” said Peter.

“ Oh, it is nothing. Everybody in Siberia is waiting to hear from friends! You Americans! You are too serious about everything — what does it matter if you be not the man? ”

But Peter *was* serious. He almost wished now that he had led her to believe that he was a messenger. For he was afraid that she would go away and he would see her no more. He wanted to see her again and again, and in time bring their conversation to the subject of the former governor and get from her some information as to where he might look for Kirsakoff.

“ Is it true that you are in danger? ” he asked. “ That you must get away from the city? ”

“ We are all in danger here,” she retorted. “ Trust no one — the city is full of spies, and you must be careful what you say — even what you say to me.”

“ But I think I could trust you,” he said conciliatingly.

“ Please don’t trust me. I would rather not have any secrets. The greatest danger in this city is in having a secret which some person wants. I prefer to know nothing and be safe.”

“ Perhaps I could be of help to you,” said Peter, having an idea that by offering protection he could gain her confidence and learn from her where Kirsakoff might be found. “ I am an American officer, and if I should employ you for my government no one would dare threaten your safety.”

“ Perhaps you could help me,” she said thoughtfully. “ But I know little about you — what part of Russia are you from? ”

Peter hesitated. It would not do to tell her he had

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been a boy in Chita for that news would start gossip, and he would be under suspicion at once if Kirsakoff were killed. He drank some tea before he answered the question.

"Oh, I have not been in Russia for years — I left Kiev when I was a boy. Come! What is your name? We must be friends if we are going to go into these matters."

"What is your name?" she countered.

"Call me Peter — that is my name."

"Peter! That is no name for a Russian. What are your other names?"

"Peter Petrovitch."

She laughed at him with a touch of saucy insouciance, and lifted her shoulders as if she put small faith in the name. "What is your generic name?"

"Gordon, but I hoped you might call me Peter Petrovitch — it has been many years since I heard it thus. You make me forget that I am an American, I, who am Russian."

She turned toward the door. "I am afraid that I must go now," she said.

He rose from his chair and moved after her. "But you have not given me your name."

"Call me Vashka."

"But that is no name for a Russian," he insisted. "The generic name, please."

"That will do for now — it is good enough for a samovar girl." She moved toward the door, but lingeringly, as if she had other things she would say but refrained from saying them at this time.

"Ah, but I know you are not really a samovar girl," he said seriously. "You are a lady, and I shall be happy to help you and serve you if it is in my power. Promise that you will come back to me."

"Perhaps I shall come," she replied, and smiled over

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her shoulder at him. She felt unable to cope with him at this time, knowing that Ilya had said he sought her father. She knew that before she talked with him further she must consider the matter and consult with the sagacious Slipitsky. "You are very kind," she said, smiled again, and went through the door.

Peter bowed as she disappeared, looking back at him from the hall as if fearful that he would run after her and see where she went. But he closed the door, and stood smiling at himself in the big mirror — smiling over his thoughts of the amazing samovar girl he had found in Chita!

XV

THE TRAP SHUTS

SLIPITSKY was with Michael when Katerin returned from Peter's room. The old Jew was consumed with curiosity about the American, and worried for the safety of his guests, for he sensed menace in the stranger. Schooled all his life in the secret intrigues among exiles and living in an atmosphere of spies and counter spies, he had an astounding mental perception in devious ways. The fact that Rimsky and Ilya, two peasants, had knowledge of the American which pointed to some hidden purpose in his arrival in the city, was proof enough to Slipitsky that something was seriously wrong. The chasm of caste in Siberia prevents an officer from dealing with the lower class of peasants — unless he is using them for an advantage against his own class. To the Russian, an officer comes from the upper classes, so the idea that Peter could have ever been a peasant was beyond the comprehension of Slipitsky or Kirsakoff.

Katerin slipped into the room quickly and fastened the bolt of the door. Slipitsky rose from his chair and turned to her inquiringly, but she put her finger to her lips for caution. Michael was sitting on the bed. He saw the trouble in Katerin's face, and knew that she could not bring the good news which they had hoped for — that the American had come from friends.

"What is the word?" whispered Slipitsky. "What says the American?"

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"He is a Russian!" said Katerin.

"Holy Saints!" gasped Michael, astounded, and his head began to shake with excitement.

"Russian!" exclaimed Slipitsky, looking at Katerin as if what she had said exceeded all probability. "How could he be a Russian? Is it that he has come to my house dressed as an American and is really a spy?"

"All I know is that he speaks the Czar's Russian," said Katerin. "He has not come from friends," and then she went on and hastily told them how she had given Peter every hint that she dared, so that he might understand who she was, and that he had denied being sent to Chita to help anybody.

"Then that fool of an Ilya was lying!" said Michael wrathfully. "He has made fools of us! We came here expecting to find a dove and we have found a hawk. Ilya had sand in his brains! It was all done to fool us and get money! An American who is a Russian — what good can he do us?"

"Hah! A riddle!" said the Jew, and he rubbed his hands and drew himself a fresh glass of tea. "Now we must consider what it all means, Excellence! The rope is tangled and we must find the end of it!"

Michael sat for a few minutes with his eyes screwed up against the light from the window, his wrinkled old face twitching nervously. Presently he got up and began to pace the floor in his stockinged feet, hands behind his back, his shoulders bent forward in dejection. His weak knees bent beneath him as he shuffled about. His body quivered with excitement and his eyes glowed as if he were racked by a fever.

Katerin sat down by Slipitsky, and stared at the floor in reflection, seeking to piece together in her mind again the whole time of her visit to Peter and to gauge the value of what both of them had said. If only Ilya were still

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alive and could be questioned as to how he had learned that the American wanted to find her father!

"He knew at once that I was not of the servant class," said Katerin.

"Only a Russian could do that," mused Slipitsky. "It is all very strange," and he wagged his head slowly and thoughtfully as he puzzled over it. "Did he tell you why he had come to Chita at all? — did he say nothing of his mission to this place?"

"Nothing. Yet if Ilya spoke the truth, Rimsky was told why the American had come. Why does he trust a *moujik* and hide his purpose from me?"

"It would not be wise to have too many in the secret," said the Jew. "He knew you were not what you pretended to be, and was careful. The man who rides a tiger cannot get off, and this Peter Petrovitch from Kiev is not too trusting. I give him credit for that, though we would like to know his business."

"He is an enemy!" declared Michael.

"Then we shall know in good time," said the Jew. "An awl cannot be hidden in a sack."

"A Russian from America — the worst of all," said Michael into Slipitsky's ear, as the old general came and hung over the Jew's chair. "They come back here from America with their accursed ideas of liberty! And what do they do? Kill the Czar and ruin the country — turn it over to the Mongols! Old friend, we have an enemy on our hands who is a greater danger than the Ataman. And we have brought trouble to you and your house."

"We are all in the same boat, Excellence. If we lose our wits, we are lost. I am no worse for your coming, and you are no worse. The thing to do is to weigh and consider — and in time settle with this fellow who calls himself an American officer but hunts with peasants."

Katerin was discouraged. She had set her hopes on

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the American's coming to solve their problems and relieve them of the danger from the Ataman. But now they were involved in a new puzzle, and could not see their way out of it. For more than two years she and her father had managed to save themselves, but now it seemed that all their bravery, all their devices and stratagems had but pushed them further into a trap. Life had become an intolerable nightmare, and the trifles of daily existence had become a burden. It seemed easier to die than to go on with the struggle against the madness which had come over their world.

Michael went roaming about the room again while Katerin and Slipitsky sat in thought. He gazed abstractedly at the furniture, as if he expected to find in it some astounding quality which he had never noticed before. After he had walked about in this way for several minutes, he returned to his position between the chairs of his daughter and the old Jew, and leaning down between them, whispered, "We must rid ourselves of this man! We cannot live here under his nose and wait for him to strike. He is a Russian hunting me. That is no new thing — but it proves he wants me for no good. We must poison him!"

"No, no!" said Katerin, taking her father's arm and pulling him toward her. "We cannot kill a man just because Ilya said Rimsky told him the stranger was seeking you — we must learn from Rimsky what we can, as much of the truth as we can get."

"I say that, also," declared Slipitsky. "It must be done. I shall send for Rimsky and question him so that he will not know the reason for my questions."

"What! You will let Rimsky know that we are here?" asked Michael, alarmed at the idea.

"No, Excellence. But I can comb him for what he knows. A few drinks of wine and he will be as putty in

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my hands. You must trust to me to solve this riddle."

"Then it is well," said Michael. "But I am resolved upon one thing — we must do away with this American, no matter what Rimsky says."

"I shall send for Rimsky at once," said the Jew, rising and going to the door. "Be careful till I have had a talk with the old liar." And with a gesture of caution, Slipitsky drew the bolt and disappeared in the hall.

Katerin secured the bolt, and sat down again, her hands clenched in her lap. She felt that she was at the end of her resistance. Yet she went on trying to think of some way in which to learn from Peter the truth of why he had come to Chita. There was no reason to fear him, so long as he did not know who she was. And there was a chance that the talk that he had come for her father was all foolishness, or a shrewd scheme to play upon the fears of herself and her father and gain money. In that case, she saw that the American might be a protection — that he might take them from the city.

"I shall go back to him and talk," she said to her father.

"You shall go back to poison his samovar," said Michael. "I have a feeling that this man knows already who you are, and is blinding your eyes. You must end his life!"

"Would you have me murder an innocent man on the word of Ilya?" she asked, making talk now only to keep her father's mind engaged and prevent him from the despondency which threatened him.

"This man is an enemy!" insisted Michael. "We cannot risk such a menace. We have trouble enough with the Ataman, and I speak only for your own safety. Oh, Katerin Stephanovna! I care nothing for my own life! It is you I would save. I would sell the days I have left to live if they could be turned into years for you, my

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daughter. I would die this minute, if I could loan you life!"

The old general put his hand on her head and caressed her gently, his eyes full of tears and his body shaking with his sorrow for her.

"I know, little father," she whispered, taking his hands in hers and kissing the withered skin. "But your life is dear to me — so dear that I would do as you say to save you to me. But I cannot believe that this young man intends to harm us. He is a Russian, true enough, but have you lost faith in all of our people? And this Peter Petrovitch appears to be kind and gentle. You and Slipitsky think in the old ways — only the old thoughts of violence and death. This man has been to America and he may not be an enemy at all. But if it is true that he is seeking you out for evil, then we must be sure of that before we do anything against him."

"And how are you to find it out? Can you go to him and tell him that I am in the next room and ask him what he seeks me for? Do you forget that he is using peasants to trace me?"

"I shall learn his secret," declared Katerin. "A woman has her own ways for such things — if he hunts you, he shall first tell me, and the why of it."

"Ah, you women trust too much," said her father. "This is a matter in which no time must be lost with wiles. We must know before the Ataman finds ——"

"I, too, think of the Ataman," put in Katerin. "What if the American, though an enemy, should protect us from the Ataman?"

Michael gave her an incredulous stare. "Impossible!" he said.

"But it is not impossible," insisted Katerin, who already had the inspiration of a sudden way out of the difficulty. "What if I should tell this American that I

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am seeking Michael Alexandrovitch? Would he not confide in me then? And if both of us are seeking you, it is not likely that he will keep his secret from me — especially if I should admit to him that I plan to have your life.”

Michael sat down upon the bed, speechless for a moment at the boldness of the plan.

“Holy Saints!” he whispered after a minute. “You would do that, Katerin Stephanovna? That is something worthy of the best of the Czar’s police! Ah, but you will be playing with fire — you will need your wits at every instant.”

“True, I shall need my wits,” said Katerin. “I am willing to play with fire, and match my wits against the stranger. And when I learn what I want — then we shall need our wits all the more.”

“I am old and my head is addled,” said Michael. “Sometimes I think I must be going mad — here I am, who was governor, hiding in my own city, helpless and with ——”

There came a cautious knock at the door. Katerin went to it, and heard Slipitsky’s voice outside. She let him in — and with him was Wassili!

“You stupid one!” exclaimed Michael at sight of the old *moujik*. “Why have you come here? The Ataman will ——”

Slipitsky made frantic signals for quiet, and when he had shot the bolt behind him, threw up his hands in an attitude of resignation.

Wassili was wrapped to the eyes against the cold, and stood dumbly waiting till he should be asked what he had come for.

“This is the last of us!” whispered the Jew. “We shall all be killed now! Zorogoff has been to your house, Excellence — and he told Wassili where you were — here

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in my house — the floor and the room! So poor Wassili has run away with the warning that you are discovered.”

Michael's head sank upon his breast, as if he now submitted to fate.

“We must go at once!” said Katerin. “We cannot let you draw the wrath of the Ataman because you are hiding us, our friend! We shall prepare to go at once!”

“Go!” said the Jew. “You shall not till I am dead! We can all die together, mistress. Let the Ataman come, I say, and may he die with ten thousand devils dancing before his eyes!”

“Truth! Let him come,” said Michael. “You are here, Wassili, now stay with us. Let Zorogoff come, and by the Holy Saints he or I shall be carried out of the place on a board!”

“And perhaps the American will be glad to meet the Ataman, eh?” said Slipitsky. “We may as well bring him to the test, now that the Ataman knows where you are. We are riding a tiger, and we may as well pull his ears!”

XVI

KATERIN'S STRATAGEM

PETER found himself enmeshed in a maze of conjecture about Vashka. He knew that she was not a samovar girl, yet it was quite possible that she had been compelled to become one for her own safety. But whatever her purpose might be, it was apparent to him that she had expected to find in him a messenger — and that the expected messenger would be an American officer.

As Peter studied the matter, he saw that she would not know the expected messenger by sight, but would have to submit him to some test. It was plain enough that she had been greatly disappointed in Peter, for he had seen in her face signs of actual terror when she realized that she had blundered with him.

It was the possibility that some other American officer was expected in the city which worried Peter. Such an event might well interfere with his plans for killing Kirsakoff. Peter did not want it known to the American army that he had stopped in Chita — at least, only casually. He did not want his presence in the city, nor the time, established too well. He hoped to flit away to Irkutsk and report himself there without any mention of having been in Chita. Then he could come back, report himself in Chita and go on to some other city. In this way he wanted to establish the fact that he had been in Chita, but make it appear that his time in the city had been after Kirsakoff had been killed rather than during the period of the former Governor's death.

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But it might take Peter a week or more to find Kirsakoff, and then it would take time to work out the details of the affair in such a way that there would not be the slightest indication that the American officer who had been staying at the hotel had had anything to do with it. But another American officer in the city would complicate the business. The newcomer would expect to keep in close touch with Peter, and would probably expect to share his room — and the stranger might have a Russian-speaking orderly with him. And that would mean that Peter's facility with the language would be discovered, his request to be sent over into Trans-Baikalia would become significant, the leaving of the orderly at Nikolsk would build up a chain of circumstantial evidence. All that might be awkward for Peter if some slight trifle connected Peter with the killing of Kirsakoff.

Peter wondered if he would see Vashka again. It seemed a remote possibility that she would return. Why should she? She knew now that he was not a messenger, and to visit Peter again could do her no good and might reveal to him the line on which she was working. There was a slight chance that she might be in the American service, but he dismissed that thought, for she had given him no sign that she was a member of the military secret service. His mind being occupied along a certain channel, he had no basis on which to begin to analyze the aims of Vashka. The key to the solution of the problem, for him, was old Rimsky. But that Rimsky was in any way concerned with the visit from Vashka, was as remote from Peter's mind as would be a suggestion that the samovar girl was the little daughter of Kirsakoff. That little girl still lived in Peter's memory as a child sitting in a sledge the morning Peter's father had been killed. His mind held that picture — held it without change. It was a picture which did not take cognizance of the passage of

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years, a butterfly caught in amber, say, through the ages.

If Vashka did not return, Peter resolved that he would go out and try his hand again with Rimsky. The old cigarette-seller might be induced to tell something which would afford a clew of the whereabouts of Kirsakoff. And it might be wise to loaf in the restaurant of the old post-house, and strike up an acquaintance with anybody who would talk. There was no time to be lost, if Peter was to find Kirsakoff and get about the business which had brought him back to the Valley of Despair.

When noon came, he rang for a samovar. Before long he heard some one moving in the hall, and after a short interval, there came a gentle tapping at his door.

"Come!" he called, and turned his head. "Vashka" entered with the samovar, pushing the door open before her with the forward end of the metal tray.

"Oh, I am sorry," he said, rising from his chair. "I did not expect to see you—I thought the other girl would come."

She smiled at him, quite gay and playful now, with a trace of coyness in her manner. She seemed amused at him because he had not expected her to return.

"Would you feel sad if I never came back? Would you miss me so much?"

"Of course I would miss you," he replied, not sure what else would be safe to say. He would have preferred some light pleasantry which would answer her more in keeping with her mood, but he was afraid that she might resent gayety on his part, even though she affected it herself.

"Then I may presume to say that I am the favorite samovar girl of the American."

"And it would not be presumption at all," he said.

He moved and closed the door after her, while she busied herself at the table with the samovar. He had a mind for an instant to lock the door and to demand that

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she give an explanation of herself and her reason for coming to him in the guise of a servant. But he smiled at his own Russianism — his impulse to do the dramatic thing. He decided to draw her out in a more careful manner. One thing he was determined upon — to settle, as far as possible, her motives in playing servant.

"How long since you have seen Zorogoff?" he asked, going close to her and standing so that the light from the window fell across her face.

"I? Why, not so long ago." She looked at him with curiosity as to why he had asked the question.

"Have you seen him since you were here?"

She laughed lightly. "If I had, it is quite likely that I would not have come back."

"Then I'm glad you did not see the Ataman. And please don't see him, if it is going to mean that you will come no more."

"Thank you," she said. "I don't know what you mean — but it appears that there is an implied compliment. Do you mean it as a compliment?"

"What other things could I mean?"

"You might mean many things." She shrank away from him now the least bit, as if she distrusted him.

Peter sat down in the chair at the end of the table.

"And what might I mean, for one thing?" he asked with a quick glance at her.

"You — you might mean — that you are suspicious of me, and that would make me feel sad."

She stood, as if half intending to flee from the room, and observing him in wonderment.

"Suspicious! Why should you be under suspicion?"

"Everybody is under suspicion — no one trusts another here," she replied.

"No doubt you have suspicions of me — because I speak Russian," he countered.

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"I am not sure of you," she said frankly. "What have I but your coat to prove that you are an American officer?"

"You have no more than I have to prove that you are a samovar girl. Oh, come now! Let us not play with words! What did Zorogoff say when he learned that the American officer speaks good Russian?"

She straightened up suddenly and her body seemed to grow rigid. He heard the hiss of her breath, and then an hysterical laugh came gurgling from her lips.

"So that is it!" she cried. "You think I am a spy for Zorogoff!"

There was no mistaking the revulsion which she felt. Peter knew now that she was sincere.

"I don't think so now," he said. "But if I trust you, I must know that you are not a spy. You know that I am not the messenger you are waiting for, yet you have come back to me. I am glad that you came — but why?"

"Because death threatens me," she replied. "And Zorogoff is my danger. I seek your help." She uttered the words in a low monotone, but with an intensity of feeling which startled Peter. He got up and went to the door quickly and turned the big brass key in the lock — and pocketed the key.

"Does that mean I am your prisoner?" she demanded. But there was no fear in her.

"Sit down, please," said Peter gently, ignoring her question. He made a gesture toward the chair at the end of the table opposite his own.

Katerin — "Vashka" — obeyed, willingly, it appeared. But her readiness to obey was not so much submission to his will as he supposed. She knew now that Peter had come seeking her father, though the reason was still a mystery. She was determined to solve the mystery and learn his secret.

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Slipitsky had gone to Rimsky shortly after Wassili arrived at the hotel with the news that Zorogoff knew where the Kirsakoffs were hiding. The old cigarette-seller, alarmed by the fate which had overtaken Ilya, went into a panic of fear when Slipitsky charged him with knowledge of the American officer's purpose in coming to Chita.

The Jew charged Rimsky with knowing more than Rimsky did — and Rimsky lied. He attempted to put the burden of the affair on Peter. Ilya was dead, so Rimsky felt safe in lying. And, in fact, he did not know exactly what he had said to Ilya over the vodka. So to clear his own skirts, Rimsky made the flat statement that the American had asked directly where Kirsakoff might be found. It was a lie — yet it was the truth in so far as Peter's purpose was concerned.

Thus the story of Ilya was verified. Katerin and her father knew Peter sought them. And Katerin had been tempted to reply to Peter's demand as to why she had returned to his room, by demanding why he had come to Chita. She refrained because she did not expect that Peter would tell her the truth in case he was an enemy. She intended to get at the secret by more devious methods.

"Now, you must trust me," he began, in tones barely audible to her. "You have already told me that you are in danger from Zorogoff — which indicates that you do trust me to some extent. Why do you fear Zorogoff?"

"Because he has already threatened me with death — and worse," she replied, calmly. "He is half Mongol. I do not fear death itself, because if he should take me from this place, I have poison ——" She slipped back the cuff of her sleeve, and showed Peter two white capsules held in the hem of the cloth by thread sewn in loosely.

"So that is it!" said Peter, looking into her eyes and

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seeing the truth in them. His face began slowly to change from an expression of startled comprehension of her plight, to anger; he drew his lips back upon his teeth, and the rising anger glittered in his eyes. "The Mongol dog!" he whispered. "Can he dare — with a Russian woman — a woman like you!"

He saw relief from strain come into her face, and she clasped her hands together in a quick gesture of joy at his understanding and sympathy.

"So that is why I came back here to you. You were a Russian, and I knew you would understand — and an American officer."

He took her hands and kissed them, with head bowed, after the Russian fashion, as an act of fealty and respect.

"I don't know what I can do," he said after a minute. "But I do know that if Zorogoff dares touch you, I shall stand in his way. True, I am a Russian — as this Mongol shall learn."

"Thank you," she said simply, withdrawing her hands. "You cannot fight an army, and Zorogoff has many men to do his bidding. You would be helpless against him. He is not a man to allow a single American to thwart him."

"I do not fear him," said Peter. "I doubt if he would dare kill an American officer."

She smiled at his belief that Zorogoff could be checked by any fear of the American army.

"Who would know who killed you, or when?" she asked. "No, you must not risk your life for me. Zorogoff's hand would not be known if you were destroyed — and I would not be any the better."

"Does he know you are here — in this hotel?"

"Yes, he has traced me. The city is full of his spies, and there is a Russian behind his power — a Russian of the old régime who is advising Zorogoff."

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"Who?" asked Peter.

"Oh, you would not know him," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I fear him more than Zorogoff, for I know that that this Russian is a part of Zorogoff's government."

"But I should know," insisted Peter. "If I am to help you, I should know all the facts in the case, so that I may inform my superiors. Who is this Russian?"

"He was a Governor here in the old days — before the revolution."

Peter leaned forward across the table, keenly alert, though he attempted to conceal his interest. "A Governor of the old days," he said slowly and softly, so that the sentence was akin to a caress. "That is interesting. I wish you might tell me his name."

She brushed her hand across her brow. "It is a dangerous secret," she warned.

He laughed lightly. "Dangerous secrets are my business," he said. "Learning them — and sometimes keeping them."

"As I am in great danger because of having this secret, you also would be in great danger from Zorogoff if you had it. Remember, I caution you — Zorogoff will do all in his power to prevent you from escaping Chita if he learns that you know who is behind him and his government."

"I accept the danger," said Peter. "Come — we shall be in danger together! What is the name of this former governor?"

"General Kirsakoff." Her eyes held his as she spoke the name. She saw his eyelids lift swiftly, and heard him draw in his breath slowly. His hands began to close into fists, and the strong fingers sank into the palms while the knuckles grew white as the skin was drawn tautly across. He leaned back in his chair, and the little muscles

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of his jaws stood out under the skin of his cheeks as he set his teeth together. And there crept into his face a look of exultation, of infinite satisfaction — she saw him thrilled with the joy of the hunter who at last gets sight of his prey.

Peter turned away from Katerin and glanced at the window, but without seeing it. His face softened into a smile, and he got up from his chair, crossed the room, came back, and sat down again before her.

"Tell me more about this Kirsakoff," he urged. "What is his name?"

"Michael Alexandrovitch," she said. "He is a man of noble family — of old boyar stock. He ruled here many years before the revolution." Katerin pretended not to notice the smile which was still playing at the corners of Peter's mouth — she looked at him casually as he sat down again, but busied herself making squares and circles on the tablecloth with her finger.

"Is Kirsakoff in the city — now?" he asked.

"I presume so. He spends most of his time here, but he keeps well hidden."

"Do you know where he may be found? Where he lives?"

"It could be easily learned. What would be the good of knowing?"

"It does not matter," he said. "Still, it might be of use to know. Do you think you could easily find out whether he is in the city or not? How would you go about it?"

"My father was an exile here," said Katerin. "He was transported ten years ago, and I followed from Moscow and lived in the Street of the Dames. My father was a political — and he knows too much now about Kirsakoff for our safety."

"Then your father is in the city?" asked Peter.

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"Here in the hotel with me. We came here and hid against Zorogoff — and Kirsakoff. That is why I came to you when I heard there was an American staying here. We knew we could trust you."

She went on and told him how Zorogoff's soldiers, and the Ataman himself, had given her and her father the mental torture with firing squads; of the threat of the Ataman for revenge upon her for her insults, and the flight from the house to the hotel when they heard that an American was at the hotel. But she did not mention Rimsky or Ilya.

"And you have no way of escape from the city?" asked Peter.

"It is impossible," said Katerin. "Some of our friends got away. But Zorogoff put the cordons round the city after that, and then Kirsakoff joined with Zorogoff."

"What kind of man is this Kirsakoff? What does he look like?" asked Peter, set upon getting all he could about his enemy.

Katerin looked over Peter's head, toward the window, and thought for a second as if recalling the appearance of her father. "He is a tall man, strong but not heavy," she said slowly. "A face inclined to redness — and black mustaches. He is a soldier, of course, and stands very straight."

"Of course," said Peter. He recognized the description, for Katerin had described her father as he had looked when he was in his prime. "Does he go about the city? Could I recognize him by his uniform?"

He was eager but cautious.

"He might be found at the *sobrania* late at night," said Katerin. "But he will be well guarded. You should be careful in approaching him, for he has a secret bodyguard, as well as the officers who generally are drink-

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ing wine with him. He does not wear a uniform, but rich furs, and he wears his pistols out of sight. He does not always dress the same, for he has been a cruel man, and is much hated by many people."

"Do you know where he lives?" asked Peter, who was taking care to conceal his eagerness to get all possible details. He asked his questions with an assumed indifference.

"No, I cannot say. But I am sure my father knows. But what good would it do you to know?"

"Not any," said Peter. "Yet I would like to find this Kirsakoff. Where is your father?"

"Here — in the hotel," said Katerin.

"Perhaps it would be as well if I were to ask the Ataman about Kirsakoff," said Peter. "Yet I would like to talk with your father, if he would see me."

"By all means talk with my father," said Katerin hastily. "It would be fatal for you to admit to the Ataman that you had ever heard of Kirsakoff's ever being here, or concerned in the government of the Ataman. That is a secret they will conceal at any cost — and that is why we are in danger, my father and I."

"But Zorogoff would not know how I had learned about Kirsakoff. And I might plead ignorance — I might even test the Ataman by asking him if he knew where Kirsakoff might be found."

"I have put my life in your hands," said Katerin earnestly. "If you mention Kirsakoff to the Ataman, he will know that you have been talking with us here in the hotel. And Zorogoff's soldiers will come for us at once."

She rose, rather agitated by Peter's idea of talking with the Ataman. The effect upon her was exactly what Peter sought — for he wanted to talk with her father. If she feared that Peter would go to the Ataman instead for

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information, she would make it possible for Peter to learn more of Kirsakoff and his haunts.

"I do not intend to increase your danger," said Peter, also rising. "Have no fear on that score. But I am bound to find Kirsakoff in some way — unless your father can help me I shall have to make inquiries in my own way."

"It can be arranged that you talk with my father," she said, moving toward the door. "Is it really necessary that you find Kirsakoff?"

"Not necessary, perhaps," he said. "But I strongly desire to find him."

"I — I would like to know the reason."

"I will tell you that when you tell me where he may be found," said Peter with a smile.

She stood for a time looking into his face. He saw that she was pale, and far more excited than her restrained manner revealed to the casual glance.

"I will ask my father if he will see you," she said presently. "He is very old and ill — he has been shot by sentries — a bullet through both his cheeks, though he is nearly recovered now from that. He is suspicious of all strangers, and you must be patient with him."

"I promise to be patient," said Peter. "If you will arrange it for me ——"

"Ring for the samovar at five," she said.

Peter held out his hand quickly, as if there were a compact between them which must be affirmed. She gave him her hand, and he bowed and lifted it to his lips.

"Vashka," he whispered, "do you wish to leave this city?"

"If I could take my father with me," said Katerin, "yes, I would be glad to escape the dangers here."

"If your father will tell me where Kirsakoff may be found — I shall take you both away."

"Oh, then we shall find Kirsakoff!" she said with a

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sudden return of her gay manner. "Please! I am your prisoner here! Allow me to return to my father!"

Peter unlocked the door, and she smiled over her shoulder at him as she ran down the hall.

XVII

SETTING THE SNARE

KATERIN returned to her father. She found him sitting by the table playing a game of solitaire, and he looked up from the patterns of the cards with blinking, questioning eyes. She did not speak at once, but her face was eloquent of the surprise and shock she had suffered in her talk with Peter. She was coldly calm, as if she knew now something of what was before them, and was ready to meet the issue. A plan had already formed in her mind, but it was not yet clearly defined and she wanted time to think and prepare for whatever was necessary.

“What have you learned?” whispered Michael, leaning toward her from his chair. “I can see that you know much — and I doubt that it is good. Do you know why this man has come?”

“Yes, I know,” she said, and sat down beside him and drew herself a glass of tea. Her hands shook for all her resolution not to betray to her father the fact that once more they were blocked in their hopes of escape.

Michael waited till she had refreshed herself, and Wassili, who had been making Michael’s bed and pottering about the room in pretended busyness, came and stood close to Katerin with anxious face, keen to hear what the mistress would have to report of her visit to the room of the American.

“Then Rimsky spoke the truth?” pressed Michael. “It is true that the American came seeking me?” He had already divined it from Katerin’s manner.

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"Yes, Rimsky spoke the truth," said Katerin slowly, and Wassili crossed himself and uttered a smothered exclamation of satisfaction.

"And what did the American say?" urged Michael, impatient to have the whole story. "Come! You hold it back from me! Is his quest evil?"

"He is most eager to find you," said Katerin, who was reluctant to give the full story too abruptly. She was trying to devise some way of giving the facts to her father which would not be too abrupt and alarm him to rashness. And she wished to have her own plan worked out mentally so that she might have it to offer against the startling import of what she had learned from Peter.

"For what purpose?" insisted Michael. His head was beginning to shake faster, as it always did when he was in an excited frame of mind. He reached for a cigarette from a tin box, and his hands shook so that he dropped the tiny tube of tobacco.

"I am not sure yet," said Katerin. "That is something I have still to learn. All I know now is that he is not a friend — that he means evil to you and we must be careful. We must do nothing to stir his suspicions of who we are, till we have gone to the bottom of what brings him here and what he hopes to do."

"We know enough!" said Michael. "He comes for evil — and I shall kill him!" The old general's agitation disappeared as if by magic. The scent of danger steadied him, he thrust his chin out and squared his old shoulders, sitting back in his chair as if it were all settled now and all that remained for him to do was to go out into the next room and kill Peter.

"No, no," said Katerin hastily. "Nothing must be done too soon! First, we must learn more about him."

"He is an enemy, that is enough," said her father. "Wassili, a match!"

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"Yes, he is an enemy," admitted Katerin. "But we are not in a position to attack an enemy now; besides, what good would it do us to kill him, if we do not know anything about him? First, as I said, it is my business to draw his secret from him."

Wassili held a flaming match forth to Michael. "Master," said the *moujik*, as he applied the flame to the cigarette between Michael's lips, "I am quick with the knife — I can strike a good stroke, and no one will be the wiser, for I can have the body carted into the forest. Then you and the mistress will be free from his danger."

"If we do well, we can use this man to protect us from the Ataman," put in Katerin. "Though he seems to be a menace, he may in fact be so twisted to our use that he will be our salvation."

"A man who is an enemy! Protect us? Are you talking madness, my daughter, or have my wits become addled by age? I shall not allow a man who is my enemy to save me even if he would or could. No, no, I say it — this American — this Russian who calls himself an American — must die. And no time lost in the matter, let me say!"

"But I say you are wrong, father," insisted Katerin, putting her hands on his knees. "If he does not know who we are, what difference does it make to us or him if he is an enemy. The thing for us to do is to make friends with him — and fool him into the belief ——"

"But he will know me!" protested Michael. "You expect him to talk with me — even see me — and not know who I am? That would only be putting our heads into the maw of the lion! I can tell you this, my daughter — I shall strike first, while the advantage lies with me!"

"Truth!" exclaimed Wassili excitedly. "The master speaks truth! And I am the one to attend to the task!"

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"But he will not know you," pleaded Katerin. "He thinks of you as you were years ago, in the days when you were Governor, while now you are an old man in the rags of a peasant, with ——"

"Ah, he will know, he will know! We must not trust to ice so thin! I shall not turn my horse loose too soon when danger is over the hill. I may be old, but I have not lost my cunning with my enemies, I hope."

"You forget that our lives depend upon our deceiving this Peter Petrovitch, my father."

"I think our lives depend upon his not seeing me till I am ready to strike," argued Michael. "What would our lives be worth if he were to come in here now and see me? A beggar's kopeck — the turn of a hand, the call of a quail in the brush! P-fooh! I know!"

"But we have no time to spare. The Ataman's men may be at the door at any minute. Before that we must win this stranger to our side, and before he can discover who we are, slip away with him to Vladivostok — to Harbin — to ——"

"Vladivostok! You expect an enemy to take us to Vladivostok? To Harbin? Why, I would sooner, than that ——"

"He wants to find you. What if I tell him you may be found in Harbin? Or Vladivostok?"

Michael thrust aside a cloud of smoke that had gathered before him, and squinted his eyes at his daughter, as if he really doubted her sanity now.

"And how could you find me in Vladivostok, when I am here in this rat-hole in Chita? Truly, my ears hear strange words. They are not worth a last year's egg."

"You do not understand. If this stranger looks to me to help him find Michael Kirsakoff, and he does not know you for Michael Kirsakoff, what is to prevent our

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telling him that we can take him to some other city — to find you? ”

Michael cocked his head to one side and pursed his lips. Then a smile broke over his face as he began to comprehend.

“We have no time to spare,” pressed Katerin. “It must be done before he can learn by any mischance who we are. Once we are free of the city, his chances of discovering our ruse diminish.”

“But how can he take us away, even if what you say is true? The Ataman would prevent us — he would betray us. There would be some slip — and we would be in the hands of our enemy, or delivered into the hands of the Ataman. We double our danger and gain nothing,” objected Michael.

“The Ataman would not dare stop an American officer. We must chance that. This stranger would give his eyes to find you. Very good, then! We shall fall in with his desires and turn them to our advantage. We must take him away under the pretext that he is to find you, then in reality he will be aiding our escape from the city.”

“Oh, but he would get to know me in time. My voice, my looks, my way of speaking. If he has ever seen me at all, he will know me. He may have my description — do not be trapped by him. The wolf knows the color of the hare he pursues.”

“I told him how you looked ——”

“What!” cried Michael. “You told him how I looked and you expect him not to know me?”

“How you looked twenty years ago, my father. And he did not know the difference.”

“That was to blind your eyes to his purpose,” said Michael.

“And I shall blind his,” said Katerin, with sudden resolution. “Wassili! Fetch me the cover of the pillow

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from the bed! And a knife — with a sharp edge!”

Wassili, with a puzzled look upon his face, turned away to obey her.

“And what is all this?” demanded Michael. “Am I to be wrapped like a mummy and put into a bundle? Am I to be carried about with a rope to my middle like a handle?”

“I shall make sure that the stranger does not recognize you — leave it to me, and we shall outwit this stranger and come to safety.”

“Then you had better take good pains with it,” said Michael, “for if he gives the glimmer of an eye that he so much as thinks I look like myself, I shall kill him!”

“If that must be done, then it must,” admitted Katerin, as she cut the edges of the pillow and began ripping it into long strips. “But your face must be hidden from him, for he might see something in you that would remind him of you in the old days. We must take care against such betrayal.”

“And what are these rags for?” demanded Michael.

“A bandage about your face to conceal you further.”

“Oh, p-fooh!” said Michael disgustedly. “What nonsense is this, that I should be wrapped up like a Turk? How the devil am I to talk or breathe or eat my soup? I’ll have none of it — I, who was a general of majesty!”

“You have had a bullet through both cheeks,” said Katerin. “Come, please! Hold up your head — these cloths will only keep your teeth warm against the cold. That is my dear father — and remember, it is to save us. Better this chance than to sit here and wait till the Ataman sends Shimilin for us again: Come!” She held up a strip of the cloth.

“Are you going to tie up my face as if I were an old beggar with boils?” demanded Michael.

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“Trust to me, my father. When the lion is stricken he must still roar, that his enemies will be misled. You have said that to me many times. Trust to my wits — and we shall see.”

He puzzled over it for a minute, and then threw back his head in submission. “I shall not stand in the way of your safety,” he said. “I leave it in your hands. My heart is brave, but the years have put chains upon my body,” and he sighed wearily.

Without more ado, Katerin wrapped the grizzled old face with the strips of cotton. They passed over the top of his head and down under his chin. His eyes, nose, and mouth were clear of the cloths, and his ears stuck out oddly behind the wrappings. The white hair on his chin gave him a more aggressive look than usual for his beard was thrust forward by the bandage. The scant hair on the top of his head stuck up, and wavered as he moved, like the crest of a bird.

Katerin leaned back and studied him with critical eye when she had finished.

“It will serve well enough,” she said finally. “If he knows you now, he would know you in spite of anything we could do. And now listen to my plan. You have been a political here for the past ten years — and you hated General Kirsakoff, who was a cruel Governor and ——”

Michael gave a snort of wrath and wrested the bandage off over his head and threw it upon the floor.

“I will have nothing more to do with this madness! I was not cruel — I was but just! And I shall not blacken my own character! Not an inch shall I give to my enemies on that score — I, who was a general in the army of majesty!”

Katerin laughed heartily, and picked up the bandage. She knew better than to take her father seriously when

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he was in such temper, and she also knew that she should gain her end if she were patient with him.

"I only say what the American thinks," she explained. "If he already thinks that of you, you do not damage yourself. And what a joke! A joke that will save us! General Kirsakoff telling how cruel Governor Kirsakoff was! Would you not fool this stranger now, to laugh at him after we have lost him in Harbin where we are safe?"

Wassili sneaked away into a corner to laugh discreetly, his shoulders heaving with suppressed merriment over the wrath of Michael.

"Be still, you, Wassili," growled the old man, turning to look after the *moujik*. "By the Saints!" he cried to Katerin. "You see how it is? Am I to be made into a buffoon for my servants in my old age? Am I to be turned into an actor in a play, a silly clown of a fellow to make the country folk giggle into their drink? Am I to forget what figure of a man I was ——"

"You forget my danger," she chided gently.

"I forget nothing!" he retorted. "It is I who am remembering that I once was Governor here!"

"Do you remember the Ataman Zorogoff?" she asked, with sober face.

"Yes, and I'll dance on his grave — but I'll not have my head wrapped up like an old woman doing a penance."

"Very well, then we shall do nothing more, but wait till the Ataman comes. Then we can take the poison of honor."

Katerin sat down by the table and threw the loops of the bandage from her.

Michael looked at her, and an expression of infinite tenderness and love came over his face. His lips quivered, and he struck several matches violently without getting a flame. He threw the last one to the floor, and held out his hands to her.

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“Forgive me, Katerin Stephanovna — I did forget. But now I remember, and I see what you are striving to do. It is true, what you say, and we must play with this American. And if we take good care, it may all come out as you say — it will be a way out of our danger and our troubles. Come, please! Put on the rags, and I shall be the best old exile ever was seen, one who is fleeing from the wicked Governor — from Kirsakoff! Please! Again the bandage, and I’ll be good.”

“Ah, little father, there is another way to fight without using swords and guns. There is a way to gain your ends without your enemy’s suspecting that he is pushing your cart.”

She gave her attention to putting the bandage back.

“I grant the truth of what you say,” said Michael. “But what will Slipitsky say to this? He is a shrewd fox, and there is many a twist in a game of this sort that he knows — he has helped many a man to escape from me, for all his friendship for me in the old days. Never did I dream that we should have to resort to his cleverness — but the fox takes his wisdom where he finds it, and that is why we say that he is wise.”

“It does not matter what Slipitsky thinks of it. We cannot leave all the tricks to our enemies. And you must have faith in me, if I am to work this out so that good will come of it, and we get away from the soldiers of the Ataman.”

“I’ll trust you, my daughter. By the Saints! You should have been a man, Katerin Stephanovna!”

“And perhaps if I were a man, we should both be dead by now,” said Katerin. “This is a war of wits, and we women have had to use our wits for many years. And if those in the high places had heeded the women, Russia might not have come to what she has.”

“It is good that there are wits between the two of us,

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for mine are gone, my daughter. I am a hindrance. I am but a millstone about your neck, else you would have escaped from Chita long before this."

"You won't be a millstone if you will obey what I advise in this affair with the American officer. If we cannot go through with this thing, it is better not to try our hands at it."

"Have no fear — I'll say black is white if it does you any good," said Michael, now once more with his face trussed in the bandages.

"Listen well to what I say," cautioned Katerin. "And you, too, Wassili. For if we fail, we have not one enemy, but two — this stranger as well as the Ataman. And if we succeed, we have none, for one will save us from the other. What better can we ask than that a man who is an enemy should deliver us from danger?"

"Give me two enemies, if that can be done," said Michael.

"Mind what must be done. Our name shall be Natsavaloff. You were banished for plotting against the government of the Czar. First, we must learn why the American seeks Kirsakoff — for he may not be alone in his reasons, but have others who are equally dangerous. We must get to the bottom of why he seeks you, though the reason does not matter for our purpose. We shall have Slipitsky's advice, too, before we bring the American to this room to learn where Kirsakoff may be found. And we are not to tell the American where Kirsakoff may be found unless he takes us to the city where we shall say Kirsakoff is hidden — anywhere, it does not matter, so long as we get away from Chita."

"And how is Wassili to help in all this?" asked Michael. "Where lies his task?"

"When we bring the American here, Wassili shall stand behind his chair. We must be on our guard against the

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stranger every second, and if the American should recognize — or make a move to draw a weapon ——”

Wassili finished the sentence for her in pantomime with a quick and eloquent gesture — a short thrust, done quickly, and an explanatory grunt.

“And you, my father, shall have your little pistol in your hand, and the blanket thrown over your knees to hide it — so that you shall be able to defend yourself. But do nothing rashly — unless he should know you, we must not do him harm.”

Wassili was sent for Slipitsky, and the Jew came. The four of them went over the whole plan of escape in case Peter should not recognize Michael. They spent the afternoon in taking up every possible angle of the situation. And on one thing they agreed — if Peter really proved to be a deadly enemy, and should recognize Michael — then the American officer must die.

XVIII

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PETER spent the afternoon walking the floor of his room, his whole being in a glow from the fever of revenge which had flamed up brightly within him while he listened to "Vashka"—the name by which he knew Katerin.

And Peter's inner fury was directed against his own mental image of Kirsakoff—a picture revived and given new clarity in Peter's brain by Katerin's description of her father as he had been in the old days. Peter killed that man over and over again in imagination. He knew that it might take weeks before he could so shuffle the combination of circumstances that Kirsakoff might be slain with the greatest margin of safety for himself.

Through the years, Peter's hope for vengeance had become to him a holy mission. There had been times during his life in the United States when he realized that he might never return to Siberia in time to carry out his dream of vengeance. But the old hatred had smoldered. Now it was burning at white heat.

What had been his own selfish desire was now transformed into a patriotic fervor to help his own people. The old tribal spirit of the Slav had come to life again within him when he encountered the mad ecstasy of liberty among the people in Vladivostok. He longed to have some hand in the great emancipation which had been brought about by those of his race. He was determined to join the orgy of destruction. And now he saw his own personal revenge coupled with the troubles of the

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old exile and his daughter. Not only would Peter become the savior of the beautiful Vashka and strike a blow to thwart the new tyranny of Zorogoff, but his own father would be avenged. Katerin personified for him the Russia which must be saved, just as Kirsakoff personified the Russia which must be destroyed. For Kirsakoff, a survivor of the old autocracy, was plotting with the Mongol, Zorogoff, to defeat the purposes of the revolution and once more bind the people to the wheel of slavery. The old system was evil, and no vestige of it must remain. That was the aim of the people, and Peter believed in it. His mind had never grasped the thought that in the background of events there might be a new autocracy throwing sand in the eyes of the people to enslave them with new fetters which were not yet visible. "Destroy! Destroy all who do not work!" was the cry. And as work was defined for the mass of the people, it meant common labor — and the laborer lacked the ability to think about the consequences of killing all who might be able to divine the purpose behind the cry for destruction. And Peter was trapped into thinking only of the past and its evils, without looking into the future of a race which allowed only its serfs to live.

He thought only of the fact that he had been rescued from Siberia and sent back with the power of avenging his own wrongs. And as he prayed for success, he crossed himself with both hands, in the way of the people of old. The deep well of mysticism and emotionalism which so often had swept the Slav into action without the cooler provisions of those races which had gained the beginning of their freedom in the Dark Ages, now shook Peter's soul. He was living again in the stark horrors of his boyhood — living over again the bitter morning when his father had been struck down in the street. These memories he hoped to blot out by slaying with his own

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hand one dragon of the old autocracy — Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff.

Michael would be well guarded, and wary. But his vigilance might be relaxed by artifice. Peter had not yet formulated his plan, but there would be many pretexts for getting closely in touch with Kirsakoff. Peter might even represent that he had come to enter into secret negotiations with Kirsakoff on behalf of the American government. That was one of the many possible plans which flitted through Peter's brain. But the business would require care in preparation and good judgment in its execution. All impulses toward prompt decision must be put aside — it would be a patient waiting for the minute which promised success without attaching the slightest suspicion to Lieutenant Peter Gordon of the American army.

That could be done only after a period of slowly acquiring the confidence of Michael. Peter would have to build up a pretended sympathy with the old régime and its adherents, and show a willingness to aid Zorogoff and Kirsakoff in gaining the friendship of the American forces — even plan to aid in betraying the people of Russia in their aspirations for freedom.

Peter saw himself dining with Kirsakoff as a guest of the general; he built in his imagination a succession of secret conferences with Kirsakoff, and then, perhaps during an evening over wine and cigarettes, a whisper to Michael, "Do you know who I am in truth? Peter Petrovitch, son of Gorekin the bootmaker ——!" and then the bullet and the escape.

Peter could see Michael turn his horrified eyes upon the smiling American officer who was really the son of an exile. Gorekin the bootmaker! Michael might not remember at first. How could a Governor be expected to carry in his memory a poor unfortunate, and a boy of twenty

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years before? But Peter would make Michael remember. There must be time for that so that Michael should know by whose hand he died. That would be necessary if Peter was to have his complete joy in his vengeance.

When the sun had dropped over the crest of the hills, and the frost was gradually creeping upward on the panes, etching a thick tropical foliage upon the glass, Peter went to the window and looked out over the Valley of Despair. The little hut of his boyhood was merging slowly into the shadows of the taller buildings about it. Tiny sparks appeared in the white smoke rising from the hut's stone chimney — Rimsky was evidently feeding the fire-pit for the night.

Peter stood by the window musing on the bitter days and nights of the exiles long dead and forgotten — on the staggering columns coming in afoot over the Czar's road to a living death, on the clanking of chains and fetters, on the screams in the nights as some cabal of exiles "roofed" one who had betrayed some breaking of the rules to the guards, on the barking of rifles as fugitives were hunted out of the hills.

Chita had become a city. It was built of the tears and anguish, of bodies destroyed and minds wrecked, of hates and cruelties, all mixed with the bricks and logs of its walls. And limitless legions of human beings had been poured into the wilderness and their bodies used as fertilizer to build up a new empire for the rulers of Russia.

"Oh, you cry for justice!" he said to the spirits of those who had suffered. "The time has come for justice — you have waited long, but to-morrow will not be as yesterday!"

He turned from the window and took his belt and pistol from the writing table and strapped them about him. Then he turned on the shaded droplight. It threw down upon the cloth of the writing table a yellow cone of

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radiance. It was now five by his watch. He rang the bell thrice — the signal for Vashka, as Katerin called herself.

He sat down by the table and waited. The sound of people walking about in the hall furtively, came to his ears, with the careful opening and closing of doors and snatches of conversation. He heard the strains of an old Russian air played on a violin by some one on the floor above, and the regular pounding of feet as if the steps of a Cossack dance were being tried intermittently.

It was the hour of the evening when the people in the hotel began to bestir themselves for the gay times of the night. They kept hidden during the day, and went abroad under cover of darkness to the restaurants of the city, to return to their rooms in the early morning.

The men who lived in the hotel were mostly officers who were attached to the Ataman's army, judging from those Peter had seen about the halls. The women were a flashy lot — women who had drifted up the railroad from Vladivostok or Harbin, and women of the sort that has the best of everything in times of famine and disorder. They were the parasites who seem to thrive best in times of disaster, and who get the most out of life when there are no laws of restraint. When they have acquired some amount of treasure, they are robbed and abandoned.

Katerin was at the door in response to the signal by bell with amazing promptitude. She entered without knocking, and closed the door behind her softly. She stood for a minute, a vague shadow in the gloom outside the zone of the shaded lamp.

Peter rose and moved toward her. "Thank you for coming," he said in a low voice in keeping with her secretive entrance. "Have you persuaded your father to tell me what I wish to know? Will he help me in my quest?"

"If you still wish it," she replied. "Please! Take

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the shade from the lamp — the darkness is not pleasant."

Peter caught a note of melancholy in her voice. She seemed to be discouraged, and his own hopeful attitude was somewhat chilled.

"Has anything gone wrong?" he asked.

"No, not unless it is wrong for us to involve you in the same dangers which face us. My father appears reluctant to put you into a situation the full danger of which may not be apparent to you, a stranger."

Peter laughed merrily to cover the sudden fear which he had felt that she might recede from her promise to help him find Michael Kirsakoff.

"I have no fear," he said. "There may be danger, but I am glad to help you. I shall attempt to find Kirsakoff in any event — and may well run into more danger than if your father should tell me how to go about the job. So when it comes to that, my danger is only increased if you do not help."

"Perhaps you are right," she said.

He went and lifted the shade off the lamp, and stood revealed in his uniform in the flood of light. The silver bars on his shoulders glittered as he leaned over the lamp, but Katerin's eyes rested upon the brown boxlike holster at his hip.

He swung round upon her, smiling. Now he saw that her gay mood of her former visit had vanished — her eyes seemed sadder and the light revealed the pinched pallor of her face. She was suffering from strain long endured, he saw, and a twinge of pity tugged at his heart.

He went and pulled down the decrepit window shades, and then slapped his pistol. "Here we have the power of America!" he said. "Behind me is an army. Come! It is not a time to be sad! America is here, and that means justice to the oppressed!"

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She sat down in a chair, and smiled at him, in a brave attempt to be merry with him.

"America must be a wonderful land," she said. "I have heard much about it, and read much about it. But there are many who say it is no better than our own Russia."

"What!" cried Peter. "You must not be misled. America is a land of magic! Look at me, a poor Russian boy who was the son of an unfortunate here in the Valley of Despair, and in a few years it transformed me into an officer, and sent me back to help my own people — and to help you, Vashka."

"And in time you will go back to America," she said. "Like all Russians who have been there and return to their own land, you will once more go to America."

"Oh, yes. I shall go back when Russia has her freedom. But what did your father say? Have you persuaded him to help me about Kirsakoff? You have not told me that."

"My father is discouraged. You must not be annoyed if he is slow and cautious with you, who are a stranger. He has said that he doubts if one American officer can fight the army of Zorogoff."

"But he must remember also that I am a Russian. Does he think I will hide behind my American coat, and allow Kirsakoff and Zorogoff to destroy you? I may be only one, but behind me is the American army, and Zorogoff must give heed to that."

"But if Zorogoff's men should kill you? We have seen terrible things here — men are shot down crossing the street if they are opposed to Zorogoff. And who is to know who fired the shot if you should meet such a fate? Then, if it were known to Zorogoff that we had helped you, it would be the worse for us, with no one to protect us."

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"True," said Peter, "but it is one thing for Zorogoff to terrorize a girl and a helpless old man, and quite another for him to frighten or kill an American officer — or defy the American army. He is aware of that, and he will be careful with me."

"But your soldiers are in Vladivostok."

"That is near enough to make Zorogoff think twice. In time he would have to pay the shot. And once we have found Kirsakoff and I have attended to my business, we shall leave the city."

"You are brave," she said simply, with a look of admiration.

He shrugged his shoulders. "It is you have been brave. It is easy for me to talk, with an army at my back. Please — tell me one thing — are you expecting an American officer to come here and meet you and your father?"

She looked at him in surprise, as if trying to understand what meaning might be behind his question. She locked her fingers together, and took her time before replying.

"No, we are not expecting an American officer. Our friends may send help to us. That is why I came to you — any newcomer in the city might bring word from friends — might be seeking to get news to us from friends."

She laughed suddenly in comprehension of his meaning, and went on hastily. "We who are beset clutch at any straw — and you were a straw. Yet was I not wise? For you have said you will save us — you would even take us away, or ——"

Katerin stopped abruptly, and looked into the light of the lamp. Her eyes showed more animation now, and Peter found himself admiring the patrician poise of her head. She turned away from his gaze, and shivered slightly.

"Or what?" he prompted.

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“Or you would even kill Kirsakoff for us — rid us of one of our enemies.”

Peter's eyes narrowed, and he smiled.

“What makes you think I would kill Kirsakoff?” he asked. “Have I said anything to make you believe that?”

“No,” she admitted, returning his gaze for an instant. “You have not said that. But if my father is to help you find Kirsakoff, you must first convince us that you are an enemy of Kirsakoff. It will be a secret for a secret, in the old way of bargaining among the exiles. We have trusted you much, but how do we know what your purpose is in finding Kirsakoff?”

Peter frowned at the floor and considered what she had said. He had not counted on having to take any one into his confidence. He did not doubt that he would be able to find Kirsakoff on his own account, if he had plenty of time. But his time in Chita was not at his own disposal. An American officer might come through the city and report that he had seen Peter; before very long, Peter would be compelled to go on to Irkutsk and report himself from there, or go down the line of the railroad. And once in touch with Vladivostok, he knew that orders might come from headquarters which would compel him to appear in some other city without delay.

And what damage could be done by telling this girl and her father his reasons for wanting Kirsakoff? They, themselves, feared and hated the Governor, who was again in power. They could be trusted not to betray him.

“What you say is fair enough,” he said finally. “I think I can convince your father that I am the friend of anybody who was an exile, and that ——” He was about to add, “I am an enemy of Michael Kirsakoff.” But he refrained. There would be time enough for that when he talked with her father, and he was determined

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that before he told his story, he should meet and judge for himself the measure of confidence to be given to the old man who had been an exile.

"I should like to know your full reasons — for wanting to find Kirsakoff," suggested Katerin. She, too, was wary.

"You shall hear," he said, "when I talk with your father." And he spoke with finality, as if there were no use in going further with the subject.

She went to the wardrobe against the wall, and turning to Peter, said, "Move this away from the door which leads to our rooms—I got the Jew to bring us near to you. Now we can pass from our rooms to yours without going into the hall. It will be safer, for we cannot tell who will see us if we have to use the hall."

"That was wise," he said, and going to the wardrobe, he put his shoulder against it, and steadying it with his hand, shoved it aside far enough to clear the door which it concealed. When he had finished, she picked up the shade of the lamp and slipped it back over the globe.

"We are not known to the servants," she said. "You must be careful with our names — which are — Natsavaloff."

"Perhaps it will be well to avoid using any names," said Peter. "It might increase your danger."

"It would, indeed," she agreed. "Now, I shall go round and free the bolt on our side — and take you to my father."

Katerin slipped into the hall, and Peter snapped out the light on the table and waited in darkness. In a minute he heard the rattle of the bolt on the far side of the door, and then it swung open slowly.

Katerin stood before him, outlined against the dim light seeping in from a farther room through curtains hanging in a doorway.

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“Come!” she directed in a whisper. “My father is eager to talk with you. But remember—he is very old, and he is still in some pain from his wounds. And if he is querulous, I trust that you will be patient with him.”

XIX

FACE TO FACE

PETER stepped across the threshold of the open door, and into the shaft of light spilling through the partly curtained doorway of the room beyond. Looking to the end of this vista of light, he saw the figure of a man sitting in a chair by a table. The head and upper part of this man's body were only vaguely visible and merged against the dark background of the far wall. But his boots were silhouetted in the radiance of the beams of the lamp which shot downward under the shade — boots that looked grotesquely large and misshapen, for their shadows were cast upon the floor in elongated outline.

Katerin stopped at the curtained doorway, and by a gesture, bade Peter enter before her. He went on, and as he neared the lamp on the table, he saw that the figure in the chair was a frail old man with his head tied up in a bandage. And behind the chair, better hidden by the gloom, was a man standing, whom Peter took for a servant hovering over his master with watchful care. Only the face of the *moujik* was plainly visible to Peter, and his eyes shining with the reflected light of the lamp, like two luminous pin-pricks, were boring across the room at Peter. The tense alertness of the *moujik's* posture suggested an animal crouching for a spring.

Katerin passed Peter, and approached her father. She said, "Our friend has come to us," and to Peter, "This is my father."

Peter's heels came together, and he bowed low. When he looked at the old man again, the withered head,

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wrapped in the encircling bandage, was nodding gently as if with a palsy. And the bent shoulders leaned forward under a gray blanket, to peer at the visitor. The right hand, hidden beneath the blanket over his legs, seemed to be trembling, while his left hand lifted from his knee made a motion toward a chair—it was a thin, bony hand, more like a claw than a hand.

“I bid you welcome, sir,” piped Michael, hoarsely. “But I have little hospitality to offer a guest under this roof.”

“May God’s blessings fall upon you, sir,” replied Peter, his heart quickened by sympathy with this pathetic old ruin of a man—a man who, like his own father as Peter thought, had suffered the life of an exile under the cruel rule of the Governor, Michael Kirsakoff. Here, Peter supposed, was another victim, in feeble senility, still pursued and threatened by Zorogoff and the same Governor Kirsakoff who had brought about the death of Peter’s father, and thrown the boy Peter into a big prison. And these thoughts fed the inward flame of hatred which burned through Peter’s being against Michael Kirsakoff—the very man before him, and on whom he had just called for the blessing of God! Here was his enemy of old, and he looked upon him, yet knew him not.

For a time the two men peered at each other, one knowing that an enemy was before him, and one thinking that he was in the presence of a friend. But Peter saw nothing in the old man which brought to mind anything of Michael Kirsakoff. Katerin, as Vashka, the samovar girl, had so arranged the shaded lamp, and the chairs, that her father’s face should not stand out clearly in light against a dark background. Also the bandage hid the jaws and cheeks of Michael in such a way that the old man’s facial contour was blurred. Age had done much to hide Michael, and Peter’s memory was clinging to his

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own picture of Kirsakoff of twenty years before. And Peter had adjusted his mind to the finding of Kirsakoff as a result of this interview, and somewhere beyond it, so it would have been hard to convince him that Kirsakoff was now before him.

"You come as an American officer, yet my daughter tells me that you are one of us — a Russian who has come back to help Russia," said Michael.

"Yes, and it is twenty years since I saw my native land," said Peter, as he sat down.

"Ah, it is a sad home-coming for one of the motherland's children," sighed Michael. "They say now that the people will rule at last."

Katerin stepped to the table to draw hot water from the samovar, which was so placed that she stood almost between Peter and her father, though without preventing them from seeing each other. She did not trust to her precautions against Peter's recognizing her father, knowing that there were elements in the situation which might bring on some mischance on the side of tragedy.

And Wassili acted according to his instructions. As Peter sat down, the *moujik* left Michael's chair, and offered the guest a cigarette from a tin box, lighted a match — and remained behind Peter's chair. Thus it appeared to Peter that he was being tendered the usual courtesies.

"It is true that times have changed, sir," said Peter.

"Ay, they have, truly," said Michael. "And some say for the better. Perhaps. But I'll not live to see it all finished. I shall get no good from it. But we must remember those who have died dreaming dreams for the future."

"True," said Peter. "And this ground is full of such — we must remember them, and it is our duty to see that they did not sacrifice themselves for nothing."

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"My daughter tells me that you know our story — that I was a political here."

"In the time of Kirsakoff, the Governor," said Peter.

"Kirsakoff!" said Michael. "Ah, yes, I had good reason to know Kirsakoff. There are many waiting their chance to settle with him, and he has but a short time for this world. But one of the lessons we learned here, my friend, was to bide our time — and I am waiting."

"And Kirsakoff is in with Zorogoff?"

"That Mongol dog!" said Michael. "Have you heard that he has visited upon my daughter and me the silent torture? And that even now we hide from him? Yes. Well, he has buried people to their necks by the dozen, and then sent horsemen galloping over the ground. But if God is good I shall live to see his head carried about on the end of a pole!"

"And Kirsakoff stands behind him, I hear," said Peter.

Michael exchanged glances with Katerin. "True, it is Kirsakoff who helps him hold his power."

"But it is dangerous to talk of Kirsakoff," said Katerin, as she handed Peter a glass of tea. "That is whisper talk, and I warn you."

"No," grumbled Michael. "Your life would be worth little if you let it be known that you are in possession of that secret. You are playing a dangerous game if you wish to get close to Kirsakoff."

"But if he only knows me as an American," suggested Peter.

"What! You, who speak the real Russian!" exclaimed Michael. "Do not be fooled — he will know you for a Russian!"

"I can arrange that," said Peter, with a smile. "If I can find him, that is a matter easy enough to be handled as the business needs."

Michael shook his head energetically.

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"No, no, my friend! Kirsakoff's hand is hidden. Your life would be in danger at once if you gave a hint that you even know that Kirsakoff is in the city. Be sure of that."

"Then I can pretend I do not know him," pressed Peter. He was somewhat disappointed by the resistance offered by the old man.

"You must remember, my father, that our friend has reasons of his own for wanting to find the Governor. And danger may not be a matter of concern."

Peter gave her a grateful glance for thus allying herself with him.

"If I were to tell you my reason for wanting Kirsakoff, I am sure that you would say that it is good, sir. I have waited many years to come back — and now I must not fail. I shall find Kirsakoff."

"But I should not like to be the one who puts your life in danger," said Michael. "You may not be aware of all it means — this business of the Governor is not a light subject. You will do well not to cross his tracks, for he will strike at you through Zorogoff's spies, and you will never know who struck. One cannot fight an army — and Zorogoff will not brook any interference. He will destroy you like a fly upon his bread."

"I count the danger," said Peter, sipping his tea, and willing to wait till the old man was in a humor to be more communicative.

"The Governor has five thousand rifles at his back," said Michael. "You cannot know yet the full danger."

"I shall go gladly to meet it," persisted Peter. "It cannot be any greater than my desire to find Kirsakoff."

"You would risk death?" asked Michael.

"Even death."

"What! Twenty years in America, and you would risk death to find Kirsakoff?"

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“What you say is true, sir.”

The old man studied Peter carefully for a minute. “You speak,” he said finally, “as if you had spent twenty years in the Governor’s prison, instead of twenty years in America.”

“I spent time enough in his prison,” said Peter.

Katerin uttered an involuntary exclamation of surprise.

“Here! You were in the old prison here?” she asked.

“I was,” said Peter, with a grim tightening of his lips.

“But you are too young to have been an exile!” gasped Michael. “If you had been one of — us, I can well understand. There are many who have been here for long years — they have known the chains, they have known a lifetime in cells. And still, they have no stomach for meeting the Governor face to face. That is because they know Kirsakoff — and that he is not a man who can be hunted like a rabbit.”

“I also knew him,” said Peter. “I doubt if I will fear him, even if I come face to face with him — and he knows me for a Russian, and by my true name.”

“Oh! So you knew Kirsakoff?” asked Katerin. “Then it will not be so difficult for you to find him.”

“I knew him too well,” said Peter, now beginning to fear they would settle themselves against helping him to find Kirsakoff, and seeing that he would have to take them into his confidence if they were to be of any help to him. “I knew him when I was a boy here — and I have an old score to pay off. I have come to pay it, and I shall not be kept from finding Kirsakoff, even though he were the new Czar.”

“You must have been an unfortunate to have been in the prison,” said Katerin. She was still gazing at him with curious eyes, as if she could not believe that he was really telling the truth about himself — as if she thought he was making his story fit his necessity for finding Kirsakoff.

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koff and was making it as serious as possible to induce them to help him.

"My father was an unfortunate — a political — here in the Valley of Despair."

"Indeed, was he?" asked Michael, with renewed interest. "You mean that he was here in the time that Kirsakoff was Governor?"

"In the same time — when I was a boy," said Peter, and looked at Katerin. Her face was full of shocked surprise. She seemed horror-stricken at the idea, and he wondered why she should think it so strange and so terrible. He rather expected that she would see that they would all be drawn together in common trouble, and have a common hatred for Kirsakoff.

"How strange," she said, turning to the lamp. "Then you are one of us — no wonder you seek Kirsakoff."

"Ay, that is a new string to the fiddle," agreed Michael. "I can understand now that you should want to find the Governor. Perhaps you are right in this matter after all — and I must think it over. You have reason enough, yet it is a serious thing for me to put you in danger."

Peter felt better at this new attitude of the old man, and thought that now they regarded him with a more friendly eye. He was, in truth, one of them, and there is a strong bond of sympathy between exiles and the children of exiles.

"And we might have known — could we have known your father?"

"You could not have known my father. He died here twenty years ago — before I went to America," said Peter.

"Twenty years! That is a long time to wait for vengeance," said Michael. "Many things are forgotten in twenty years, and time cures many things."

"Ay, so it is a long time, in one way, and in another

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a short time. It seems but yesterday that I was a boy here in Chita. You, sir, have worked all your life to see Russia a free land. And like you, I have learned to bide my time."

"Things must look strange to you here," said Katerin. "The city has grown in twenty years."

"Yes, outwardly things look different. But the hills, the old prison, the streets—I see them as they were. During my years in America I never forgot, though I confess I had little hope of ever coming back. But the war gave me my chance. I was going to France, but when the government decided to send troops here, I volunteered for service in Siberia. Was it not God-given that I should be allowed to come back to my native land—and to come to Chita?"

"True," said Katerin, "if the debt, as you call it, which you owe to the Governor, is such that God would have it paid." She moved her chair in such way that she was nearer the table, and so that she was closer to her father. Also, she managed so that she cut more light from her father's face.

"And what is the debt?" asked Michael. "If it is not a secret—if I am to tell you where you may find the Governor, perhaps you will see it in such way that you can trust me with the secret."

"It was Kirsakoff's orders which brought about my father's death."

Katerin's teeth shut down upon her lower lip, and her fingers closed slowly upon the sides of her chair. She sat rigid, staring at Peter, and her face became paler. Michael did not move, but his breath began to come faster, and he wheezed, as if his chest had tightened and he was about to cough.

"Killed your father?" asked Katerin, in low tones.

"No, Kirsakoff did not strike with his own hand," went

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on Peter, still gazing fixedly at the lamp. "But he ordered my father back to the prison, and when my father ran after the Governor to beg for mercy, a Cossack soldier cut my father down with a sword. And I was thrown into the big prison on the hill — I, a poor helpless boy who had done nothing."

Wassili moved uneasily behind the chair of Peter, and Katerin gave the *moujik* a glance of disapproval.

"Then you do know," said Katerin to Peter, "how cruel the Governor was to the poor unfortunates. And that is why you seek him."

"What was done to my father and me — what was it? Only the ordinary thing of the old days, as you know. Yes, that is why I seek Kirsakoff, and why I ask your help to find him."

"And how long were you in the prison?" asked Michael. "There must have been a charge against you?"

"I was in prison three months, as near as I can tell," replied Peter. "Three months of hell on earth and in darkness, forgotten to the world! It might have been three years, or three hundred, measured in my suffering — the terrible sounds by day and by night, the rats — and I might have been there till now, or dead, so far as Kirsakoff cared." His bitterness was growing, and his face was getting livid with rage.

"And for nothing?" asked Katerin. "Had you done nothing against the Governor — or the laws of the Czar?"

"Ay, even Kirsakoff would have mercy on a boy," said Michael.

"I did nothing, I swear," went on Peter. "It was the orders of Kirsakoff which sent me to prison. It was this way — an officer knocked me down in front of the post-house. And when my father came to pick me up, the Governor ordered both of us taken away to the prison."

"You see, my father belonged to the free gang — he

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was a political, as were you. My mother died here, in the Street of the Dames. I never knew her. But my father was good and kind to me. He was all I had in the world, he was all I loved, though in those days (and Peter smiled wistfully) I was taught to love the Little Father, the Czar.

“My father was struck down before my eyes, and when I was taken to the prison, the officer in charge of the books was drunk — and he put my name down in the book wrong — put my name down as my father’s — gave my father’s name to me, so that the records appeared to show that it was my father and not me, the boy, back in prison. I did not know what they were doing, and for three months it was supposed that it was my father, the political, who was in the cell by order of the Governor.”

“Then no doubt the Governor freed you — gave you the pardon,” said Michael.

“No,” said Peter. “It was God’s hand that set me free. Some convicts escaped one night, and were recaptured by the cordons in the *taiga*. But before the soldiers took them, they had waylaid a sledge carrying an American fur-buyer to Irkutsk. His name was Gordon. The convicts robbed him. When Gordon got back here to Chita, he was taken to the prison and the convicts were brought out to be identified by him as the robbers. It happened that one of these men, named Grassi, had been put in the cell with me. When he was taken out into the prison yard, I was taken with him. Then it was discovered that I was the son of my father, and that there was no charge against me. Mr. Gordon, the American, asked to take me as his servant. I was released, the prison commandant corrected the records, and Mr. Gordon took me with him to America.”

Peter paused, and looked at Michael, to see what effect the story had had on the old man. But Michael’s head

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was nodding gently, and he seemed to be turning the matter over in his mind, his lips moving as if he were shaping words which he did not speak aloud.

Katerin stood up suddenly, and tested the fire in the samovar. She seemed agitated, and Peter assumed that she suffered with indignation at hearing his sufferings at the hands of the Governor. Then she turned to him swiftly.

“What will you do — when you find the old — Kirsakoff?” she demanded.

“I shall kill him,” said Peter simply, and was aware of a quivering hand upon the back of his chair. He turned and looked at Wassili. The *moujik's* eyes were shining like a cat's before a fire, and there was the look of murder in his face.

“Kill him!” cried Michael. “But he did not kill your father!”

Peter was startled for an instant by the old man's horror, and Katerin's face revealed the fact that she had never dreamed that the American officer was bent on murder — she seemed actually to be in terror of him. Peter suffered a moment of abashment, and gulped down what was left of the tea in his glass. He understood that these people did not yet fully appreciate how wantonly his father had been killed, nor how little provocation there was for the killing. He was determined to convince them of the justice of his designs.

“My father and I,” he began anew, “lived in a little hut down the Sofistkaya — it is there yet — I can see it from the windows of my room. An old man lives in it now, a queer old patriarch, who sells cigarettes ——”

“That is Rimsky!” exclaimed Wassili to Katerin. She nodded, and looked at him so that she checked him.

“Yes, Rimsky,” said Peter. “That is his name. That is where I lived with my father, and where he taught me

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the almanacs. We were happy, for we had a samovar, and the ladies of the Street of the Dames came to us often. They gave me cakes, and my father money. Of course, I know now that he was an underground to the prison — he carried messages back and forth between wives and their husbands in the prison.”

“Yes, they had many ways of getting news in and out in the old days,” said Michael, with a smile. “But go on with your story, my friend.”

Peter struck a match to light a fresh cigarette, and the flame showed his face to be flushed by his emotions.

“The year of which I speak,” resumed Peter, “the almanacs from Moscow were late. The mail-sledges came in from Irkutsk one morning. I ran down to the post-house to learn if the almanacs had come. There were Excellencies in the sledge. As I remember, the Governor’s daughter — Katerin was her name, I think, and ——”

“Yes, yes,” cried Katerin, striking her hands together. “Katerin Stephanovna! She was the Governor’s daughter — I have heard of her! It is said now that she is dead!” and Katerin turned to her father, as if to verify what she had said.

“It has been said that she is dead this long time,” assented Michael. “Some say that Zorogoff ——” He checked himself.

Peter continued with his tale, warmed to it again by the evident interest of his listeners.

“Yes, that was the Governor’s daughter. Her coming was his reason for meeting the sledge that morning. Well, I was eager to be sure that the almanacs had come — and a Cossack knocked me down because I called to the Governor’s daughter for news of the almanacs. And when Michael Alexandrovitch, the Governor, came to the sledge he found my father picking me up. I was bleeding and stunned from the blow. And the Governor was in a

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rage at us — that my father should be making trouble — and ordered him to be stricken from the free gang and put back in the prison once more — and me with him.”

“But you said your father was killed,” said Katerin.

“Yes, as I say,” replied Peter. “My father” — and Peter inclined his head toward the icon in the corner over Michael’s head — “my father was so broken in spirit at knowing he was no longer of the free gang and that I was to go to prison, that he ran after Kirsakoff. It was then that a Cossack ran my father through with a saber — and swore that my father had struck at the Governor with a knife — a leather knife which he pulled from my father’s pocket.”

“But did the Governor know — could he know — of this terrible happening?” asked Katerin.

“Ay, did the Governor know?” echoed Michael.

“Know!” cried Peter. “What would he have cared if he did know? He had just ordered us both to prison for nothing! And did he care enough to investigate the case during the three months I was inside a black cell — to give me my freedom? No! He forgot all about it and me, even if he did know what had happened? Does he care now what the fate of you and your daughter may be? I tell you, sir, I must find Michael Kirsakoff! And you must be the one who puts me on the right road!”

“True, you must find him,” said Katerin. “Now we know that you have good reason for wanting him.”

“Thank you,” said Peter fervently. “I knew that when you saw my story as I could tell it, you would realize that above all things, I must find Kirsakoff.”

“What was the name of your father?” asked Michael.

“Gorekin — Peter Pavlovitch — a bootmaker.”

“Gorekin!” gasped Michael, his head snapping back in his amazement. “Gorekin!”

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"Have you heard of him?" asked Peter, with a quick look at the old general.

"I thought for a moment I knew the name," said Michael. "But if you say he was a bootmaker, it must have been another. No, not if he was a bootmaker — and this man I knew less than ten years ago."

Michael looked at Wassili, and put a hand upon the table beside him, keeping the other under the blanket. He began to drum with his fingers, deep in reflection. No word was spoken for several minutes. Peter could hear Wassili breathing behind the chair.

"You have our sympathy," said Katerin. "And you must find the Governor. If you will give me time to talk it over with my father ——" She gave Peter a significant look, which he interpreted to mean that it would be wiser not to press now for information about Kirsakoff, but to leave it in her hands.

"Thank you," said Peter, and he rose, and bowed.

"You shall find Kirsakoff," said Michael, staring at his hand on the table. "By morning I shall know where he may be found — perhaps. We must not act hastily." The palsied head was shaking gently, and the old man was lost again in thought.

"Yes, yes," Katerin put in hastily. Peter saw tears in her eyes. She followed after him as he turned to go back through the rooms, and they left Michael and Wassili alone.

Peter stopped at his own door, and looking back over Katerin's shoulder, saw against the light of the room he had just left, a shadow cross — and then the figure of Wassili peering after them.

"Good-night," said Katerin. She seemed nervous and worried. She also had caught a glimpse of the old *moujik* outlined against the glow of her father's lamp.

Peter seized her hands in sudden impulse and pressed

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them heartily. "I cannot tell you of my gratitude, Vashka," he whispered. "It was you who helped me in this — and I have waited long! You are going to persuade your father to tell me where I shall find Kirsakoff!"

She gently drew away from him, and he released her hands.

"I shall do what I can," she whispered. "But take care — this house is full of enemies. If we are to defeat the Ataman, be wary. Bolt both your doors to-night!"

Then she slipped away to her father.

XX

THE BLOW

PETER, alone once more in his room, found that a strange calmness had come to him once the secret of his purpose in returning to the Valley of Despair was in the keeping of two other persons. There was for him in that fact something of the relief of the confessional. For twenty years he had nursed in his soul the grievance of his father's death, and his own imprisonment — nursed it most secretly, pent it up within his consciousness, till it seemed that his body had become a kind of culture tube of germinating hate.

For the first time since he had left Chita as a boy, he found an easement of his soul burden. These people to whom he had told his story, understood his deepest emotions regarding his father. No American could ever have understood fully, Peter was well aware. Prison to an American implies disgrace, some sort of stain upon the character which is never fully lived down. But to this old exile, as Peter supposed Kirsakoff to be, Peter's story was an honor to him. For the old man had suffered the horrors of the exile system, mixing, as it did, the highest type of Russian with the lowest — the thinker with the cutthroat.

Peter knew he stood better in Katerin's regard than before, now that she knew his story. He had seen in her face a deep and profound pity for him. What he mistook for pity was her alarmed concern when she discovered that Peter sought to slay her father. Peter could not know that she had suffered torture while he had sat looking into

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the lamp — that she knew how a look, a word or some turn of the head might betray her father.

Peter had always thought that the first assurance of a successful end to his quest for Kirsakoff would mean a delirious joy. Yet here he was coldly calm, a calm which was a steadiness that he ascribed to his own efforts to control all outward indications of his grim satisfaction. His brain was singing, over and over, in an endless refrain — “I shall find Kirsakoff.”

He turned the light in such way that he could see himself in the big mirror between the windows, and smiled at himself. His face was slightly flushed from the emotions and memories roused by telling how his father had been killed before the post-house, and how he himself had endured and escaped from the prison on the hill.

His eyes burned with a feverish light. In fact, he was drugged with elation, strangely soothed, much as a man is lulled with wine till his senses are subdued by the poison and his reasoning faculties are benumbed. Yet his alertness was in no whit deadened. On the contrary, he was well aware of what was before him, and he was alive to the necessities of the situation. He was approaching his long-awaited moment of triumph, and he knew that he must hold himself against the slightest rashness in thoughts or actions. He must, he thought as he surveyed himself in the mirror, avoid the look of craftiness which was coming into his face — he must feign a bland innocence, and dispel everything which savored of eagerness, impatience, impulsive haste. He had days, weeks, in which to carry out his purpose, and at last he was on the right track. Besides, it would avail nothing unless he could accomplish the destruction of Kirsakoff without leaving the hint of a clew to the identity of the slayer.

He left off studying himself in the mirror, and began pacing the floor, head down and hands behind his back.

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There was a strange sense of satisfaction in the knowledge that Vashka knew his secret. He felt that it constituted a bond between them, a mutual sympathy such as is known only among exiles, or the children of exiles.

In fact, Peter had created in his own mind a vision of Vashka that went beyond the time when he would have killed Kirsakoff. It was sort of an unformed, inchoate dream which consisted of nothing more tenuous than mental flits into the future in which he always saw Vashka. As she knew the secret of his coming back to Chita, she would also hold his secret about who had killed Kirsakoff. She would always understand, as she understood now. Only a Russian, a Russian girl who knew as Vashka knew the terrors of the Valley of Despair, fitted his idea of a confidant in this affair. Katerin, as "Vashka," had done her work well!

Peter was now sure that Fate had a hand in everything which had brought him back to the place of his boyhood. The whole thing had come about with an inevitableness which revealed a divinely directed plan. If some force had shaped events for him with such unerring accuracy, he saw no reason why the final result should not be brought about with the same ease with which he had come thus far on the way to his revenge.

He had a feeling that the task he had set himself was now accomplished — the finding of Kirsakoff. His mind was at rest, and he felt the need of relaxation from the strain of wavering hopes and doubts. Also, he suddenly felt hungry with that voracious appetite which comes to people who pass the crisis of a severe illness and know without reservation that they are on the way to complete recovery.

The fiddler he had heard on the floor above before going to talk with Katerin and her father, had now descended to the hotel dining room, and was playing merrily. There

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were other instruments, too — an orchestra. The music was a novelty for the hotel. It lifted Peter's spirits, and dispelled the gloom of the place. For the first time since he had arrived in Chita Peter wished to move about among other people.

He washed at the little sink, and combed his hair. Then he went down the hall to the dining room. There were but a few people in the place — young men in Cossack uniform, with flashily dressed women, sitting by twos at the little tables along the wall under the frosty windows. The gloominess of the room was apparent even under the lights and the music, but it was the merriest scene Peter had seen in the city.

There were four musicians on a raised platform at the far end of the room close to the red-painted buffet-bar with the smashed mirrors. And the quartet was clad in poor and ill-fitting gray suits — the men were German prisoners of war.

Peter clicked his heels in the doorway and bowed before he entered. The officers at the table looked up with startled eyes, but inclined their heads slightly in response to the courtesy. But it was plain that his American uniform had attracted special attention, for the women companions of the Cossacks stared at him. Peter wondered if there was any resentment because he wore his belt and pistol, though he could not understand how he had committed any breach of etiquette by being armed, for the young Cossacks were all wearing their pistols and their sabers.

The musicians played a German air, sadly, and with good evidence that some of the strings were missing. There were two violins, a 'cello, and a clarinet.

A waiter came to Peter. The man was clad in the same bluish-gray as the musicians. He also was a war prisoner, and clicked his heels and was quite military in his manner.

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"Have you a ticket, sir?" he asked, speaking in English.

"Is a ticket necessary?" asked Peter in surprise. "I am staying at the hotel."

"Yes, sir," said the waiter. "This is an officers' mess — officers of the Ataman's army."

"Then I am sorry," said Peter, reverting to Russian for the benefit of the Cossacks. "I thought this was the hotel restaurant. I had no intention of intruding," and he pushed back his chair to rise from the table.

"You speak Russian, sir," said the waiter, in Russian.

"Yes," said Peter. "And you speak English surprisingly well — also Russian."

"Hans!" A young Cossack who sat two tables beyond Peter, and faced him, called the waiter away and handed him something. The waiter was back to Peter by the time he had risen to leave the room.

"Here is a ticket for you, sir. The Cossack gentleman — the lieutenant — wishes you to have your supper here," said the waiter.

Peter bowed to the young officer, who smiled across the shoulders of the woman with him. He was a thin-faced chap, with heavy black hair down on his forehead after the Cossack fashion. Gold straps covered his shoulders, and a great saber lay outside the table legs, where it swung down to the floor from his belt.

Peter sat down again. It would be in the nature of an affront not to accept the proffered hospitality. And the waiter brought thick cabbage soup with a yellowish scum of fat floating on its surface, black bread, a plate of chopped meat, with a mound of boiled grains of wheat, and a glass of tea.

During the meal the orchestra continued to play. The Cossacks and their women talked in low tones. Finally, they began to drift away gradually till none was left but

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the young officer who had sent Peter the supper ticket. And in time his companion disappeared also. Then the young officer approached Peter's table, and bowed.

"You are an American officer, but you speak Russian," said the Cossack. He smiled and clicked his spurred heels.

"Yes," said Peter, rising and saluting. They shook hands formally.

"I am Lutoff, a lieutenant in the army of the Ataman Zorogoff," went on the Cossack with pride. "I heard that there was an American officer in the hotel — and I was about to call upon you this very evening."

"That is very kind of you," said Peter, seeing that there was some purpose after all in the matter of the supper ticket beyond the characteristic hospitality of all Cossacks. He saw that he would have to play the game, whatever it might be. "My name is Gordon, and I also am a lieutenant."

Lutoff bowed again.

"Please sit down with me," invited Peter, and they both sat down facing each other across the small table. Peter did not like Lutoff any too well — there was a craftiness in his eyes, an insincere suavity in his manner, an affability about him that was forced. His friendliness lacked a frankness which he did his best to simulate, but behind his smiles and his politeness there was a promise of lurking menace.

"You have not called upon the Ataman," said Lutoff lightly, half in question, yet half in the nature of a statement of fact — perhaps a challenge.

"No," said Peter. "I was three weeks coming up on the train, and my health was hurt. I have been resting."

"I trust you will feel better soon," said Lutoff. He uttered the words as if he meant more than that — Peter

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caught an implication that it would be well for him not to neglect calling upon the Ataman.

"Were you intending to pay an official call this evening?" asked Peter. He thought it advisable to probe a bit after Lutoff's obscure inferences.

"No, just for a friendly chat. You speak Russian well for an American. You must have been in the country before." Lutoff offered his cigarette case, a ponderous silver box covered with semiprecious stones of various kinds and studded with raised metal initials — mostly gold — of friends who had added to its ornate embellishments.

"My father was in business in Moscow. I was born and grew up there," lied Peter glibly, as he took a cigarette. He had no intention of taking Lutoff into confidence about his early life. He considered that none of the Cossack's business, and the personal prying a trifle impertinent.

"Are American soldiers coming to Chita?" pressed Lutoff. It was obvious now that he sought information for the Ataman.

"Oh, yes," said Peter easily. "I understand a battalion will be coming up the line. That is something I intend to take up with the Ataman — how many barracks are available in this vicinity."

Lutoff gave this consideration for several minutes, but made no comment. Then he looked over his shoulder toward the orchestra to make sure that no waiters were within hearing.

"As a friend, I wish to tell you something," he said in a low tone.

"Thank you," said Peter, but to all intents he was indifferent and smoked his cigarette with complacency.

"While I belong to the Ataman's staff, I am not speaking officially," said Lutoff. "It is merely as one friend to another. You understand my attitude, of course."

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"Of course. Have no hesitation in speaking."

"Then what I wish to say to you is that if I were you, I would not trust civilians who live in this hotel." Lutoff looked squarely at Peter, as if to gauge the effect of the advice on him.

"Civilians!" exclaimed Peter. "Why, I did not think of that. I supposed that nearly everybody in the hotel was in the Ataman's service."

"There are many who are not," said Lutoff, a trifle annoyed by Peter's coolness. "Surely, you do not think that all civilians quartered here are in the service of Zorogoff?"

"I am not so sure," returned Peter. "But why shouldn't I trust them? What is there wrong — or dangerous about the civilians?"

"There are spies among them."

"You mean they are spies for the Ataman?" asked Peter, not taking his eyes from Lutoff's. Peter was somewhat amused by Lutoff, and was taking considerable delight in beating him about the bush. The whole incident was so Cossack-like, so childishly dramatic.

Lutoff shrugged his shoulders. "The Ataman has his spies, of course."

"And perhaps I have talked with some of them," suggested Peter.

"Perhaps. But that is not what I mean. I only warn you to be careful."

"You are very kind," said Peter. "But have you any particular person in mind?" He wondered if Lutoff could be working along a definite line.

"You would be wise to avoid those people you have been talking with," said Lutoff, and leaned back in his chair to blow smoke rings toward the ceiling, thoughtfully.

Peter laughed quietly. "Rather a vague warning," he

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said. "I have talked with several persons in the city — just as I am talking with you."

"You know the people I mean," said Lutoff with some tartness, still gazing at the ceiling.

"I appreciate your consideration for me, sir. I assure you I would be glad to follow your advice if you will limit it to the people you evidently have in mind. But so far, what you have said might refer to anybody."

Lutoff looked at the table, twisted a bit of black bread off a slice which lay on a plate, and kneaded the bread into a ball of dough on the cloth.

"You have been talking with people in this hotel," he said presently.

"Not many," said Peter. He was sure now that Lutoff was referring to Vashka and her father, and began to be disquieted. Did Lutoff know anything, or was he merely guessing? Was it possible that a spy of the Ataman had heard the conversations with Vashka and her father? If so, had the spy heard Peter tell his story and his reason for wanting to find Kirsakoff? If the latter was true, it was likely that Kirsakoff already knew of Peter and his purpose, for according to Vashka, Kirsakoff was hand in glove with Zorogoff. Peter was really alarmed now. He wondered if Wassili was to be trusted. He wondered if Vashka was really a spy. He doubted that, for if Lutoff were in the service of Zorogoff, Lutoff would scarcely be warning Peter against Vashka. But the situation was dangerous, Peter knew well.

"True, you have not been talking with many," said Lutoff. "But those with whom you have been talking — they are not safe for you."

"That is quite possible," said Peter, smiling. "Almost any one here is dangerous to a stranger. You see, when it comes to that, I am most discreet with you, Mr. Lutoff."

Lutoff bowed his head slightly. "You compliment me.

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But I am not trying to mystify you or to frighten you. When a man comes and warns you, you cannot very well say he is a menace to you."

"No," said Peter. "But your warning is vague. If it is to be of any value to me — who are the people you warn me against?"

"I speak of the old man — and the girl," said Lutoff abruptly, and lifted his eyes to Peter's.

"The old man and the girl!" repeated Peter, with an amazement which was well feigned. "Here in the hotel? I am not sure that I know whom you mean."

"And I am sure that you do," shot back Lutoff. He had dropped his polite indirectness and was ready to argue with Peter — almost ready, it appeared, to dictate to Peter on whom he should talk with in the hotel or the city.

"Then you know what you know," said Peter calmly. "But I cannot be sure what you know, unless you tell me, thus I cannot be sure that you speak as a friend. First, if I am to consider your advice, you must give me some assurance that you have knowledge of whom I have been talking with — otherwise, my friend, you are seeking information rather than giving it." He had no intention of being trapped into admitting that he had been talking with Vashka and her father. The Ataman and Kirsakoff might suspect what they liked, but Peter was not going to tell Lutoff anything.

"These people are hiding here in the hotel," said Lutoff, resuming his kneading of the brown dough on the tablecloth.

"Hiding?"

"Yes."

"From the Ataman?" asked Peter.

Lutoff looked up with an angry grimace, and Peter knew that he had put one shot home. He had revealed

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some knowledge of the Ataman's tactics, and he had satisfied himself that Vashka and her father were telling the truth. He had put Lutoff into something of a hole, which the Cossack might find it difficult to get clear of again.

"You had better keep your hands off this matter," warned Lutoff.

"Oh, is that it?" asked Peter. "Then this is a warning about listening to people who have something to say about the Ataman, is it?"

"You may judge for yourself," replied Lutoff.

"I already have," said Peter, suavely. "I judge that you are not warning me so much against certain people, as that you are warning me to beware of the Ataman Zorogoff."

"If I were you, I would not mix in political matters in this city, Mr. Gordon."

"You must remember that you are talking to an American officer," said Peter. "Am I to understand that an officer of the Ataman Zorogoff tells me what I should do or should not do in Chita?"

"I think the Americans wish to avoid trouble with the Ataman," said Lutoff, with a bland smile.

"That remains to be seen — and is somewhat dependent upon how the Ataman Zorogoff conducts what he is pleased to call his government," said Peter.

"Do the Americans intend to tell Zorogoff how he shall govern?" Lutoff showed in his face that this was a most important question to the Ataman — it was what Lutoff was seeking for Zorogoff, and Peter knew it.

"They might even do that," replied Peter. "But it might depend upon the wishes of the bulk of the Russian people in this district."

Lutoff grinned. "The bulk of the Russian people are behind Zorogoff," he said.

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“According to Zorogoff,” retorted Peter.

Lutoff rose. “I am not speaking officially,” he said. “Is that understood?”

“It is if you say so,” said Peter, also rising. “But I am speaking officially. And I wish to thank you for sending me the supper ticket, and for your advice. But I cannot limit myself regarding the people with whom I talk in Chita, even to please the Ataman.”

“Am I to tell the Ataman that?” asked Lutoff.

“You may tell the Ataman what you please of what I have said, or I am ready to tell him the same myself.”

“Very good, sir,” said Lutoff, and clicked his spurs again most formally. “But I can tell you now, sir, that you will come into conflict with the Ataman Zorogoff if you interfere — if you take any further action with these people to whom I have referred. And ——”

“I cannot consider your warning unless you make clear to me just whom you are talking about,” interrupted Peter.

“You still pretend not to know?” asked Lutoff in surprise.

“I want names, not assumptions,” said Peter.

“Very good, then,” said Lutoff. “Let us not have any doubt about it, and then you cannot plead that you were not warned by the Ataman. I tell you not to mix yourself in this affair of the Kirsakoffs — old General Kirsakoff and his daughter Katerin Stephanovna!”

And Lutoff bowed again and walked directly out of the dining room, leaving Peter clutching at the table as he swayed before he sank back into his chair.

“Kirsakoff!” he whispered. “Kirsakoff — and his daughter Katerin Stephanovna!” and then his voice rose in a hysterical wailing burst of laughter above the playing of the orchestra.

XXI

THE CAT'S PAW HAS CLAWS

THE electric lamp on Peter's writing table was still glowing under its shade, but it gradually waned as morning whitened the frost-bound windows.

Peter sat by the table near the door. He was fully dressed, just as he had come from the dining room after Lutoff had warned him to have no more dealings with the Kirsakoffs. Peter's left arm lay limply on the dingy cloth, his automatic pistol close at hand lying on its side. He was wide-eyed awake and staring at the door into the hall, as if he were waiting for some one to enter. His jaw was set grimly, and at the right side of his mouth his upper lip was askew, as if he had spent the night in thoughts which resulted in nothing but a cynical smile. His face was pale under the night's growth of beardy stubble. The soles of both his boots rested flatly on the floor, and were pulled back slightly under his knees as he had gradually slipped down into the chair. His shoulders were bent forward in a crouching attitude, and his chin rested upon the front of his tunic.

When full daylight finally vanquished the darkness of his side of the room, he lifted his head and pulled up the sleeve of his left arm to look at his wrist-watch. He thought a moment, as if in doubt what to do next, and wound the watch. He turned and looked at the windows behind him, rubbed his jaw reflectively with the tips of his fingers, and got up wearily to look for his shaving kit on the shelf under the mirror between the windows.

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He studied himself in the mirror, smoothed his rumpled hair with his hand, and went about the business of getting out his razors. But he pushed the kit away irritably, and returned to the table. He picked up his pistol, took a cautionary glance at the catch which was so arranged that it revealed the weapon to be ready for firing, and slipped the pistol into its holster on his hip. Yet he did not button down the flap of the holster, but sprung the stiff leather flap back and tucked it in behind the belt. This left the butt of the pistol ready to his hand for instant use — he could draw and fire it without the trouble of unbuttoning the flap.

He went to the little wall sink near the wardrobe and dashed water in his face. Drying himself with a handkerchief, he went once more to the mirror and combed his hair with infinite pains. This done to his satisfaction, he stood before the door leading into Katerin's room, in an attitude of listening.

He looked at his watch again after a time, and as if he had made a decision, walked to the door and rapped gently upon it. He waited, listening. He heard nothing. Finally he went to the push-button near the door to the hall and pressed it three times in the usual signal for a samovar. Then he fell to pacing the floor, head down, and his hands clasped behind his back.

After a considerable delay, the peasant girl who had served him when he first came to the hotel brought the samovar. She seemed to be still half asleep, and having set the samovar upon the table, departed promptly without so much as a look at Peter.

He took a few more turns up and down the room till the hissing of the samovar drew his attention. He put the tea to brewing and waited listlessly till it should be ready. He drank several glasses of the steaming tea without any apparent relish of it or stimulation from it.

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He seemed in a stupor, as he sat staring at the floor, haggard and hollow-eyed. His face was drawn, and reflected the bitterness in his soul. He hunted his pockets for cigarettes, but found none. He looked under the table. There he saw a litter of flattened mouthpieces and matches, the remains of his night-long smoking.

There came a gentle tapping at Katerin's door. He sprang toward it and threw off the bolt. The door came open under his hand, and Katerin stood smiling at him. She did not look any too well, he thought — as if she had not slept herself. His eyes met hers, and he forced a smile. He bowed, and with a gesture invited her to enter. He did not look past her, but he was conscious of some one moving in the room beyond — her father's room.

"Good-morning," she said. "I did not bring the samovar because I did not want to risk being seen in the hall." Her voice was low, and there was a note of worry in it, as if she had already sensed something inimical in his manner, or in the close stale air of the room which reeked with the fumes of dead tobacco smoke.

Peter turned toward the window to pull a chair from the writing table.

"You — you are ill!" she exclaimed suddenly, giving him a look of concern. "And you have not slept!" She took in the undisturbed blankets on his bed.

"Yes," said Peter dully. "I have a cold — a headache. But it is nothing — see — I have already had my morning tea and feel better."

"I am sorry. You look as if you had suffered much," and she sat down, still observing him with troubled doubt. She saw the exposed pistol in the holster, but refrained from anything which would indicate that she had noticed it.

"What about Kirsakoff?" he asked, as if they should get to business.

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His words startled her, but she concealed from him any indication of her inner alarm.

"I came to tell you," she answered. "We sent Wassili out through the city last night, to people who have underground information. And he came back early with his report." She affected a quiet complacence, as if seeking news of her father's whereabouts was a trivial detail of everyday life.

"And what did he learn?" asked Peter, sitting down by the writing table with his back to the window. He was calmer now, resolved to play his part of utter ignorance of the truth about Kirsakoff.

"The last word that has come to Chita is that — Kirsakoff is in Harbin." She looked straight at Peter to gauge the effect of her story upon him.

"In Manchuria," he said, without surprise. "In that case, we should go to Harbin. Could you and your father get away to Harbin with me?"

"It might be possible — with your help." Her face took on a trace of color as her heart began to respond to her rising hope that what she planned with Peter could be carried through. At least, he had interposed no objection to going to Harbin to find Kirsakoff, and actually had in mind a willingness to take her and her father along.

"But could we find him when we got there?" he asked.

"We have friends there who know where he could be found. It should not be difficult — there are not so many Russians in Harbin, after all."

"You are a brave woman," he said quietly. "You must know that this whole plan holds naked menace for your father — and yourself."

"There is greater menace here," she replied, looking steadily into his eyes.

He wondered if she could mean that he was part of the

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menace. It was possible that she knew Lutoff had been talking — and that what Lutoff had said was already known to her. If the latter were true, she must realize that it would be impossible to manipulate Peter so that he would save them from Zorogoff. He dismissed the thought — she was bent now on leading him on a fool's errand to Harbin, and once safe from the Ataman, disappear in the Manchurian city.

It now struck Peter that it might be wise to get away from the Valley of Despair with the Kirsakoffs. Harbin offered possibility not only to the Kirsakoffs, but to himself. He could hardly expect to kill Kirsakoff in Chita and cover his own tracks.

“Have you a plan for escape from the city?” he asked.

“We have talked it over with Slipitsky — the Jew. But my father is averse to having any hand in putting you into danger.”

Peter smiled. “Your father need not worry about that,” he said lightly. “Did we not arrange last night?”

“True, but ——” She hesitated to go on, and turned her face from him.

“Has your father changed his mind since last night?” asked Peter, alert at once.

“Oh, no,” she said, looking at the floor. “We — we thought you might change yours. You have not been sleeping — and perhaps you gave thought to ——”

“I have not changed my mind about Kirsakoff,” he said when it was plain that she was not going to finish her sentence. “I am still determined to — find him.”

“We thought you might have changed your mind about helping us.” She lifted her head, and smiled at him.

He saw at once that her reluctance to avail herself of his help was only feigned. She was too subtle to be over-eager in a matter which concerned her own safety

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and the safety of her father. She intended that Peter should be the insistent one, so that any suspicions he might have that they sought their own safety rather than Kirsakoff, would be allayed. She wished the trip to Harbin to be made on his wishes instead of out of their own selfish, if natural, desire to escape the Ataman.

Peter laughed without mirth.

"We might not be able to find Kirsakoff in Harbin," he suggested.

"True," she admitted at once. "He spends his time between Harbin and Chita. By the time we got there, he might be on his way back here."

"Would you advise waiting?" he asked.

"That is for you to decide."

"Then we shall go to Harbin," he announced. "This is a serious thing to me. As I told you last night, I have waited twenty years to find Kirsakoff."

"It should not be difficult," she said casually.

"Not with your help," he said, with a play at enthusiasm. "If I find him, it will be because——" He stopped short. What he was about to say was that if he found Kirsakoff, it would be due to her. But that was not true — she was concealing Kirsakoff. Peter felt he owed her nothing there.

"Perhaps you would prefer to wait till you feel better," suggested Katerin. She was still worried about his constrained manner, and not quite sure that the change which she detected in him was due to his feeling badly, as he claimed. She sensed an undercurrent of agitation, and though the reason of it was far beyond her intuitions, she knew he had undergone some change during the night — there was something hostile in his eye, something in the slow turning of his head which revealed to her the brooding rage which burned in his brain.

"I feel well enough," he said, putting his hand to his

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ruffled brow. "The pain has gone, but I feel dull and stupid. I hope you will forgive my — stolidity." He forced a smile, and threw back his head and shook it as if to dispel a heaviness.

"When should we attempt to get away?" she asked.

"We should not delay, I think. Is it not likely that the Ataman will be down upon the hotel at any time?"

She shivered slightly. "Every minute is precious."

"The sooner away, the sooner we shall come up to Kirsakoff," he said, and rose to take a turn about the room. Then he came and stood over her, looking down into her face.

"Take some more tea," she said. "If we are to go away, you must feel as well as possible."

"True, I must. Suppose you bring your father here — and the three of us talk over the plan of going — to Harbin."

Katerin gave him a quick glance. Once more she had caught in Peter's manner a glimmer of the fact that he was holding himself in leash against an impulse to action which he found it painfully difficult to restrain. He frightened her a little, for there was that about his mouth, about his eyes, and in his voice which told her that this man was ready to slay.

"My father is still asleep, I am afraid," she said. "But I know all the plans that have been made. We are to leave by droshky — and Slipitsky will forge passports for us. The old Jew is very shrewd about such things. He helped many a man escape from — the old prison."

Peter wondered if her reluctance to let him see her father could be due to a suspicion that Peter already knew that her father was Kirsakoff.

"Droshky to Harbin! It sounds impossible! By droshky more than a thousand versts in this time of the year?"

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She laughed lightly. "Not all the way, of course," she said. "Just far enough to get away from the city — down the railway far enough to get a train beyond where Zorogoff's men are on guard."

"But how are we to get through the cordons of Cossacks?"

"An American officer should be able to pass — if my father and myself have forged passports. They would not stop you — an American."

He saw the cleverness of her plan. It was a bold move. And the Kirsakoffs would not have to risk having their identity revealed to Peter during any quizzing at the railway station in Chita. Zorogoff's passport officers would undoubtedly hold Katerin and her father if they attempted to board a train at the station with Peter — and the worst of it would be, the old general would most likely be addressed by his name in the hearing of Peter. But the sentries of the cordon around the city would be more easily fooled. In the first place, they might not recognize Kirsakoff at all if he were well wrapped in furs, and had his bandage about his face. Besides, they might be deceived by the false passports.

"Is it intended that we should go by night?" asked Peter.

"No, by day. The soldiers will not be so careful by day. By night, they might fire upon us, or hold us till morning in some guardroom while our papers were sent back to the city for examination. That is the advice Slipitsky gives. He says the best escapes are made by daylight, and the proper plan carefully worked out."

Katerin waited till Peter thought it over. He considered the plan, looking thoughtfully at the window.

"You, as an American, can be liberal with the soldiers. Give them enough rubles to make them feel they want to

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please you, but not enough to rouse their suspicions. We will give you the money."

Peter found it hard to choke down the bitterness which rose anew within him as he listened to her elaborating her plan for his deception. He was tempted for an instant to laugh at her, and tell her now that he knew all he needed to know. Yet there was a queer comfort for him in listening to Katerin go on with her intricate scheme to save herself and her father by means of the enemy of her father. And Peter realized also that they probably did not contemplate going on to Harbin with him at all — they would slip away from him on the train, at some station — anywhere once they were clear of the district in which Zorogoff's army held any power.

"Does Wassili go with us?" he asked, thinking that perhaps the servant would be taken for the purpose of killing Peter once they had used him to get them free through the cordons.

"No, Wassili will remain here."

"What is the first thing to be done?" he asked, as if anxious to get about the business.

"Send Wassili for the droshky and the driver who is in the plan — a man who can be trusted. That can be done as soon as Slipitsky has the passports ready. He was drying the ink this morning, over a smoky lamp to make the signatures fast and soften the wax of the seals so that the counterfeit seal could be pressed in. Then we drive straight toward Zorogoff's headquarters, to make it appear first that we are going there. But we go around the building, so that it will appear to the first line of sentries on the other side that we have just left headquarters. That will make the first cordon willing to let us pass with scarcely any questioning. The next cordon will take it for granted that we are all right because we have passed the first — and if there is any trouble, the

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passports will let us through. The earlier we start, the better."

She rose, flushed with hope, which was engendered by the very telling of how they were to escape.

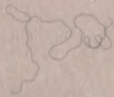
"I am ready when you are," said Peter. "Let us not lose any time."

Tears came into her eyes. "We put our lives in your hands," she said. "God will bless you if you aid us in our escape."

"The road to Harbin is before us yet," he said with a smile. "You and your father are not yet out of danger."

"True," she said, moving toward the door of her room. "I shall have him get ready at once, and see Slipitsky about the passports."

Peter opened the door for her, and bowed as she passed out. He closed the door after her, and stood looking at the windows of his room, the same queer twisted smile of the morning at the corner of his mouth.



XXII

THE OFFICER FROM THE ATAMAN

PETER paced the floor of his room, his head bent in thought, after Katerin left him. He considered the possibilities of the proposed trip to Harbin in relation to himself and Michael. An escape from Chita, he saw now, would be most desirable for his own purpose, providing he was not being walked into a trap in Harbin. It was quite possible that Katerin and Michael would try to elude him in Harbin. It was inconceivable that they were not quite as anxious to escape from Peter as they were from the Ataman, for they were in full possession of his secret. And once clear of the cordon of Cossack guards surrounding Chita, they might be able to give him the slip.

He had a desire to play out the intricate game in which he found himself enmeshed. He knew he would find it amusing to watch Katerin and Michael play at being fugitives from the Ataman with him, and then play at stalking Michael himself in Harbin — to see a man pretend to seek himself. And at any time, Peter could turn to Michael, and say, "Thou art the man I seek."

The sheer chicanery of it had an irresistible appeal to Peter. Like all Slavs, he loved the dramatic for the sake of itself, and he enjoyed proceeding by devious ways. Besides, the fact that Katerin and Michael were deliberately deceiving him, justified his own deception. Peter had actually been sorry, as he sat thinking through the night, that the identity of Michael had been made known so abruptly. It had all come with such amazing clarity

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and finality that he had found himself rather helpless when he realized that the whole business could be settled by the simple expedient of killing Michael without any more delay. He shrank from so hasty a conclusion to an affair which he had been dreaming about for twenty years. He thought that perhaps the Russian people had been caught in just such a staggering position by the easy success of their revolution. A whole nation thrown back upon its haunches, so to speak, and asking itself what it was to do now! Their minds had been so occupied for years in planning and plotting to overthrow the Czar and his government that they had neglected entirely to think of what might face them once they were successful. Their plans had not gone beyond the destruction of the Czar, and when he was destroyed, they needed more years to give thought to what was necessary for the good of the country and the people. It did not seem quite fair to them that the Czar had allowed himself to be overthrown so easily—he had destroyed their game, their one interest in life. So they began to sulk, and intrigue against each other.

In the same way, Peter rather resented Lutoff's directness in revealing the fact that the "old exile" was Michael Kirsakoff. It made the matter of killing Michael so absurdly easy! And the Slav insists upon making all things difficult—life, war, government—before he can enjoy them. He demands that Life shall be a puzzle, and examines its hidden purposes to discover why the Creator has tricked him into being a living being. He seeks a sinister motive behind his birth, and not being able to find one or to construct one out of his fancy, he kills himself because life is not worth living unless it can be proved to be a sort of divine persecution. The Slav needs a lot of trouble to keep himself happy. Convince him that the purpose of Life is to make him miserable and he is content.

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But Peter had become almost wholly Russian again, so he could not fully consider himself in the proper light. He had no intention of letting Michael escape. But he had the bothersome idea that he had to begin all over again to run Michael into a snare — a snare of Peter's own devising, and built so leisurely that the joy of vengeance would have a satisfactory accretion of mental torture for Michael.

The old general knew that Peter lusted for his life, and this knowledge must in itself fill Kirsakoff with terror. Did not Kirsakoff live in dread of a look, a word, an intonation of the voice, which would betray him to Peter? And Peter knew that he had the power to precipitate the dreaded catastrophe for Michael at any instant. All Peter waited for now was the moment which would intensify the terror for Michael — that moment, perhaps, when Michael would consider himself safest. It might come at the instant when Michael would be ready to slip away from Peter in Harbin, exulting in the thought that he was about to escape from the man who sought to slay him. Safe at last! And then Peter could smile, and instead of saying, "Good-by, my friend," could say instead, "Now, Michael Alexandrovitch, you die!"

And so utterly Russian such a moment would be! And how fitting, thought Peter. Was not Michael Kirsakoff living in a fool's paradise and thinking that he could use his enemy to save his life from the Ataman? When he saw it from this angle, Peter was glad that he knew the old man was Michael. Now he could build Michael's hopes, only to shatter them at the end.

Once again Peter was master of himself and of the situation. He would play the covert game with the Kirsakoffs — and Michael could not escape. Harbin would be better than Chita after all, for it offered a better chance for Peter to cover his tracks.

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He had come to this decision when he heard the rattle of boots on the other side of the door which led into Michael's room. Then the door opened slowly, cautiously, and presently Michael, the blanket over his shoulders and clutching the loose ends of the covering to his breast, looked in. The old man was crouched forward and he was visibly trembling.

Peter thought at first that Michael had come sneaking in during the absence of Katerin below, to attack him. But he saw at once that Michael was alarmed — he stood hesitating in the door, looking back over his shoulder, listening. He had a blanket over his shoulders, and his hair stood up stiffly on the back of his head behind the bandages about his face, like the crest of an angry cockatoo.

Peter stood still. He half expected that Michael had come to the attack — that beneath the blanket Michael had a weapon. And there was no longer any doubt that the old man was Kirsakoff. Peter recognized him for the Governor at once, though the years had changed so much and the bandages which covered his cheeks hid his predominant features. The nose was still strong and arrogant, the black eyes now deeply set with age, the white mustaches which had once been black, though sparse, changed his appearance but little.

This was the moment for which Peter had waited so long — but he knew at once that it was not the moment to strike. He wanted more time to deal with Michael, and the old man was worried about something which seemed to threaten from the hall.

“What is wrong?” asked Peter.

Michael threw up his hand in a gesture for silence, and did not turn his head, but continued to look back over his shoulder into the two rooms behind him.

“Some one outside my door,” he whispered.

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Peter listened but heard nothing.

“Wassili has gone for a droshky, and my daughter has gone down to Slipitsky — I did not want to lock the door against her. But — the Cossacks have come — I heard them talking outside.”

“Come in here, sir,” said Peter. “And we will leave this door open, so that we may watch if anybody enters and see who they are before they discover that you have come to me.”

The old man obeyed, and Peter stood in the doorway looking into the Kirsakoffs’ rooms. The curtain between them was caught aside by a cord, so that both rooms were visible to Peter, the farther one by the width of the passage between them which was enough to reveal to Peter any one who might enter and pass it.

There were a few minutes of silence except for the quick breathing of Michael crouched beside Peter and standing to one side of him so that he was hidden from the other rooms. And during this time Peter began to suspect that it was all a ruse of Michael. The old general was probably trying to catch Peter off his guard, and attack him. It was quite likely, so Peter thought, that Michael in some way had come to knowledge of the fact that Lutoff had apprised Peter of the identity of the Kirsakoffs.

But Peter abandoned his suspicion when he heard a rattling of the door in the far room. Some one was rattling the knob in place of knocking, a practice customary when one wanted to enter without attracting the attention of those in other rooms opening into the hall. The rattling ceased. The next instant Peter saw in the gloom of the far room a high white cap of wool, and a gray sheepskin coat, and a Cossack stood looking in the direction of Peter, head bent forward against the sharper light from Peter’s windows.

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The Cossack hesitated but a moment, then he advanced toward Peter, one hand behind him as if he held a weapon in concealment.

"What do you want?" asked Peter.

The Cossack did not reply, but came on till he was close to Peter.

"Who are you?" asked the Cossack. He moved slightly to the right and looked past Peter, his eyes upon Michael.

"I am an American officer," said Peter coldly. "These are my rooms."

"An American officer! You speak Russian well, for an American."

"You are intruding," said Peter. "Or have you come on a mission?"

"I am Captain Shimilin of the Ataman's staff," said the Cossack, and put his hand on the hilt of his saber as he clicked his heels and bowed, formally polite.

"And I am Lieutenant Gordon of the American army," said Peter. "This is my room. Please! Come in!" There was no other thing for Peter to do, unless he wished to bring on hostilities with Shimilin. It was very likely that the Cossack captain had soldiers within call. And now it looked very much as if an escape to Harbin would be out of the question.

Shimilin entered as Peter stepped aside. The Cossack looked at Michael, who had retreated to the low writing table under the window, clutching the blanket about him.

"Have you business of the Ataman with me?" asked Peter.

"No, not with you," said Shimilin. "I did not call upon you, but I thank you for your politeness."

Peter considered what he should do next. He had no wish to see Michael wrested from his control in this fashion, and he had no doubt but that Shimilin had come

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for Michael. It was quite likely that Katerin had been seized when she went down to arrange matters with Slipitsky. Peter frowned at the thought that Michael would escape him, even though the old general met death at the hands of the Ataman's soldiers. It came to him that the limit of his vengeance now would be but to surrender Michael and taunt him with the fact that the Cossacks — his own Cossacks — could now deal with a Kirsakoff as they had dealt in the old days with a Gorekin. But Peter hoped to delay with Shimilin. It might be possible to get the Cossack away for a time, when Peter would have things in his own hands again, if only for a brief space. He began to see that his hand was being forced — if he was to kill Michael he would have to do it in Chita — probably on the spot, and that in the next few minutes.

"Could you tell me why you have come to my room?" asked Peter.

"Oh, yes," said Shimilin easily, as he faced Michael. "I have come to arrest this old man."

"Arrest him? For what?" asked Peter, feigning a mild surprise. Shimilin seemed so casual, so light-hearted, so jaunty that he appeared to regard the whole matter as in the nature of a joke. He smiled good-naturedly at Michael.

Shimilin lifted his shoulders inside the sheepskin coat, put out both hands with the palms upward, and jerked his head. "It is a business of the Ataman. You speak Russian well. Are you a Russian?"

"Yes," said Peter.

"Of course," said Shimilin. "Only a Russian could speak so. Have you called upon the Ataman Zorogoff? What do you think of — our Ataman?" He regarded Peter with questioning eyes.

"I have not yet called," replied Peter. "I know little about the Ataman."

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"You have heard about him here in Chita. Surely, you must have formed some opinion."

"No," said Peter dryly. "If I had, I doubt if I would discuss it."

"Now, now," said Shimilin, not in the least offended by Peter's reluctance to discuss the Ataman, "I know all that. But what do the Americans — the American army in Vladivostok — think of Zorogoff?"

Shimilin's curiosity on that score seemed without limit.

"I doubt if they have given him much thought," said Peter. "But about this gentleman here — I am sorry that you want to arrest him. And in my room."

"What does that matter?" asked the Cossack.

"But little," agreed Peter, who felt that he could have his way with Shimilin if the Cossack believed that Peter was not seriously opposed to having Michael taken. For Peter knew that a Cossack can be cajoled when open antagonism only strengthens his resistance.

"True," said Shimilin, with a smile. "We need have no quarrel. And being a soldier, you know what duty means — I must obey my orders at all cost. I am glad that you have sensible ideas."

Captain Shimilin evidently took it for granted that Peter had decided not to interfere, but would allow Michael to go with the Cossack. Still, Shimilin took no action. It appeared that he wished to prolong his conversation with Peter, and his eyes when he looked at Peter were frankly curious.

Michael leaned back against the table, his back to the window, watching Peter closely. The old general's head nodded gently with the palsy, suggestive of being moved by the beating of his heart. He divined in Peter some sudden change of manner, and suspected that Peter was not going to protect him against the Cossack. But he said nothing.

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"I would advise you to call later," suggested Peter suddenly, affecting a serious mien with Shimilin.

The Cossack was visibly surprised at this.

"What! Come later? What difference can it make?"

"It might make some difference to your Ataman," said Peter, purposely putting a dash of mystery into the sentence. "I do not demand, captain, that you come later. I merely advise it — for your own benefit. I can't explain now — but if you will come back in an hour ——"

"Oh, no," said Shimilin, though not quite sure of himself. "I am not to be prevented from carrying out my orders."

"I also have my orders," said Peter significantly.

"Oh," said Shimilin. "It would be unfortunate if your orders conflicted with mine." He drew his lips tightly across his teeth, and his eyes looked squarely into Peter's.

"True!" retorted Peter. "It would be unfortunate. But I have been talking with this old gentleman here — and we have not finished our conversation."

"What have you been talking about?"

"That is a private matter between ourselves."

"Ah! Something about the Ataman, I presume," said Shimilin, giving Michael a suspicious look. Then to Peter, "You would hardly believe a man who is sought by the Ataman to have anything good to say about him — if you could trust such a report by such a man."

"What this old gentleman has to say about the Ataman — good or bad — is likely to be borne out by the actions of the Ataman. You can see, Captain Shimilin, that if your Ataman did something which did not meet my approval — such as an arrest without sufficient warrant — I might be able to form my own opinion of the Ataman."

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"Hmm!" sniffed Shimilin, and walked round slowly in a small circle, looking at the floor while he considered Peter's words. He stopped abruptly and faced Peter, one eye partly closed. "Perhaps you have an idea that the Ataman Zorogoff has no rights to consider?"

"I have never questioned any rights that Zorogoff may claim," said Peter. He saw that he had Shimilin worried.

"But the Americans have not officially recognized Zorogoff as a ruler," went on Shimilin. "You have been here several days, yet you have not called upon the Ataman."

Peter saw in this an attempt to draw from him some hint as to the American attitude toward Zorogoff, and had no intention of committing himself on the subject.

"I do not feel accountable to any person for my actions here, other than my superiors," said Peter. "If Zorogoff seeks information as to the attitude of the Americans, let him send some one to Vladivostok."

"Would you defy an officer of the Ataman?" asked Shimilin. "Would you tell me that I cannot arrest a Russian subject here in your rooms?"

"This man is under my protection while he is in my room. I have not defied you — but I suggest delay. I shall not attempt to control your actions."

"You don't want him arrested? Is that what you are saying?"

"I don't want him arrested now."

"My Ataman will not like that. It is interference," snapped Shimilin.

"I cannot help what the Ataman thinks."

Shimilin smiled and bowed. "Suppose I report your attitude to the Ataman himself?"

"I would consider that wisdom on your part," said Peter. "There are some aspects to this case which I cannot discuss now. That is why I suggested delay."

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Shimilin clicked his heels and walked straight to the hall door. He opened it, and turned. "I will submit your proposal to the Ataman—if you are willing to take the consequence."

"Thank you," said Peter, bowing in dismissal. "You are very kind."

"And," continued Shimilin, "I shall hold you responsible that Michael Kirsakoff is here when I return."

Shimilin shut the door with a quick jerk, suggestive of the closing of the jaws of a great trap.

XXIII

A LIFE FOR A LIFE

WHEN he heard his own name uttered by Shimilin as the Cossack captain departed, Michael locked his grip upon the ends of the blanket as if against a blow. A startled moan broke from his lips, an expression of horror that at last Peter would know him.

Peter turned upon the old man swiftly, alert at once and his own hand dropping to the butt of his pistol.

"I—I am revealed to you!" whispered Michael, thrusting his head forward toward Peter.

"And before you were ready, eh?" said Peter. "But you thought you could fool me, Michael Alexandrovitch, before ——"

Kirsakoff made a quick flick of his right hand, and there dropped down from the sleeve of his shirt a small derringer. The weapon fell into his hand, and he made a movement to adjust it for use. But Peter was too quick for him, and before Michael could get proper hold of it, much less aim it, Peter had leaped upon the old man and pinioned his arms against his sides.

"So the old wolf has a snap left in him yet," taunted Peter, as he bore the frail Michael back against the table and wrested the derringer from his fingers. Michael made no struggle, but relaxed in Peter's hands, and when released, sank weakly to his knees.

Peter pocketed the derringer, and then leaned down to Michael.

"You would kill me, would you? You have not forgotten your tricks, Michael! Perhaps you came pre-

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pared to kill me! So the escape to Harbin was all pretty talk, to throw me off my guard that you might ——”

“Mercy!” gasped Michael. “Mercy for my daughter’s sake — I ask none for myself!”

“You have discovered mercy. Who called for mercy for Peter Petrovitch twenty years ago when you ordered him and his father sent to prison — and then his father was cut down by your Cossacks? Answer me that?”

“If my daughter were safe from the Ataman, you could take your vengeance,” said Michael simply. “I have lived beyond ——”

“Oh, hush!” cried Peter angrily, clapping his hand over Michael’s mouth. He slipped his fingers under the folds of the bandage about Michael’s face, and slipped it back over his head, pulling it upward from the chin.

“Let me see your face, Michael! It has been a long time since we looked at one another — and each knew the other. On that day you were the bold, brave Governor, surrounded by your soldiers. Life was cheap then — to you. Come! Stand upon your feet like a man!” And Peter lifted him up against the table.

“I have no fear of death,” said Michael proudly.

“No,” said Peter, laughing. “You are so ready to meet death that you tie your face up in rags. But you look like yourself, Michael! Yes, I would have known you but for the rags. Life is not so strong in you, now, it is true, but you are the same, yes.”

Peter stood before him, with folded arms, and scanned Michael’s face with reflective memory. He spoke quietly, almost soothingly, and his face was lighted by his joyful exultation. He thought of nothing but that his triumph had come, and he cared for nothing but that he should drink his fill of the wine of revenge.

“I am helpless now — an old man,” said Michael. “But I can die — Gorekin.”

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"I suppose you can," said Peter, "much as you would throw away a lemon that had been sucked dry. But I am thinking now of my father, twenty years ago. You were brave with his life, too — and mine! I was a helpless boy and you left me in your filthy prison. I might be there now for all you cared."

"Do your will with me," said Michael wearily.

Peter put a hand upon his shoulder, and bent his body back, so that he might peer into the old man's eyes in better light.

"You have not lost your cunning, Michael. I can see it still in your eyes, faded as they are. You thought that I, Peter Petrovitch, would save your life — I, who have come half way round the world to take it, I, who have waited twenty years to see the breath leave your body!"

"To save my daughter, yes," said Michael.

"Ha! Do you not see the divinity behind all this? You run squealing to an American officer to save you from your Cossacks — and the American is Peter Petrovitch! And now that your own skin is threatened, you plead for life because of your daughter! Did you give my father a chance to plead for his son? Michael, *I am the boy* who saw his father die in the snow before the post-house — and you come now seeking my protection from the Ataman ——"

"A half-blood Mongol," put in Michael. "I would save my daughter from a Mongol — for myself I ask nothing. And I would kill you if I had the power ——"

"Stop! I shall do the talking!" Peter's body trembled with his rage. All the hatred which he had built up in twenty years, all the concentrated venom in his soul against Kirsakoff was now diffusing through his body and poisoning his brain. He lunged at Michael, and took the frail old body in his arms, swinging him

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upward from the floor as a child might be lifted in play by its father.

“Come!” commanded Peter, looking down into the white face of Michael. “I will show you your Valley of Despair! I will show you the spot before the old post-house where I watched my father pour out his blood into the snow! I will show you where Peter Petrovitch, who now holds you in his arms, could but scream in terror against you and your Cossacks — and vow to have your life!”

He turned with Michael, and thrust the old man’s face against the pane of the window, holding him high enough so that he could see over the stratum of frost on the lower part of the glass.

“Look, Michael Alexandrovitch! Up the Sofistkaya! The post-house where the mail-sledges stopped when they came in from Irkutsk! That is the spot! And I cannot even find the bones of my beloved father in the old cemetery by the prison on the hill. And below — the little hut where Gorekin the bootmaker lived! See it? The chimney and a part of the old roof. It has taken twenty years for God to put you in my hands — twenty years, before He has let you, a leaf which is ready to fall, come into my power. Can you doubt that He let you live that I might show you where you stood one cold morning, master of lives in the Valley of Despair and death waiting the snap of your finger? Times have changed, Michael. The light has come to Russia — a new day, and for such as you who gave us but black despair, black night has come. And justice without mercy!”

Peter swung round from the window and threw Michael upon his feet. The old general swayed dizzily and saved himself from falling by grasping at the table. Peter stood glowering, arms hanging out from his sides with

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fingers widespread as if he were about to seize Michael again.

"You shall have your vengeance!" cried Michael, and held up an arm to restrain Peter for a time.

"Oh, shall I?" asked Peter sneeringly, a crooked smile playing at the side of his mouth. "Perhaps you covered your face that I might have my vengeance! Did you plan to take me to Harbin to find Kirsakoff? Did you put Wassili behind my chair with a knife to ——?"

"Give heed to my words!" pleaded Michael in a passionate outburst. "I will bargain with you!"

Peter laughed at him.

"Bargain! Why should I buy what I already have?"

"Look!" Michael held forth his hand to Peter. Between the fingers was a small white pellet.

"And what is that?" asked Peter.

"I could still defeat you, Gorekin. This is a poison tablet — quick as a bullet or a blade."

"For me, Michael? Is it for me?" sneered Peter.

"No, for myself. I can die by my own hand quicker than you can fire your pistol — and you must shoot quickly, or even the Ataman will defeat your purpose with me. But I would bargain with you, Gorekin."

"To what end?" asked Peter, somewhat amused, and curious as to the old man's intent. "What have you to sell, Michael?"

"I will sell you my life," said Kirsakoff.

"I can have your life for the taking."

"No. Look! I hold the tablet six inches from my mouth. I could be dead before your bullet would reach me."

"I like to hear your voice, Michael — speaking of your own death. Well, have your say out."

"You are a Russian, and you must have your blood amend, Gorekin. You shall have it — I shall not destroy

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myself — but I ask you to save Katerin from the Ataman. That is my bargain.”

“My father and I could not bargain, twenty years ago out there in the Sofistkaya.”

“True. But I offer you now a life for a life — and a clean slate between the two of us. My blood for your father’s blood — and go your way in peace.”

Michael leaned forward eagerly. Peter’s expression had changed so that the old man had hope, but Peter was merely astounded by Michael’s proposal. This was something he had not looked for in the old man — a calm willingness to take death as part of a trade, an exchange of favors.

“The old wolf has not lost his craft,” said Peter.

“The lion returns to the lair where he was whelped,” said Michael. “What I was, I was, and done is done. What I offer is nothing, true — but you may fail in your vengeance. Rather I would make it sure for you — and go to meet the dead with no debt to living man.”

“And how is it to be done?” asked Peter. He still suspected that Michael sought to escape him by a stratagem.

“With this!” exclaimed Michael, and with his left hand he drew from the breast of his shirt a small slender object, one part red and one part white, and held it forth to Peter. “Take this, Gorekin — I put vengeance into your hand — if you will save Katerin from the Mongol.”

Peter drew near and looked at what Michael held. It was a cased dagger — a leather case of red, surmounted by a hilt of yellowed old ivory and a steel hand guard at the base of the hilt. It was the weapon of Chinese assassins, an instrument made for but a single crime for it was cupped under the hilt guard in such a way that it sealed the very wound it made. Peter knew at once what it was and what it would do.

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"Give me the promise — and take the knife!" entreated Michael. "One Russian to another — to save Katerin from the Mongol!"

"And what should I do with it?" asked Peter, seeking to draw out the old general.

"What should you do? What else, but thrust it into my heart — and take my daughter away from the city? Come! Your word! Give it and strike quickly, or the Ataman will defeat you!"

"You know well I could not escape, leaving you dead in my room," jeered Peter. "What would I gain? If I strike now — here — my vengeance will be a short joy. It is so much simpler to turn you over to Shimilin."

"By the Holy Saints!" cried Michael in disgust. "Has the blood of a Russian turned to water so that he will not kill on his own honor's account? Please! Take this blade!"

Michael drew the hilt away from the leather case and exposed a polished shaft of steel, white and glittering in the light from the windows — a weapon of exquisite daintiness, with a round blade, slightly curved.

"Look at it!" urged Michael. "It is cupped at the hilt, and if you do not draw it once you have struck, it will let away no blood. What more could you desire?"

Peter regarded him with thoughtful eyes.

Michael threw aside the leathern case, and pulled his shirt open at the neck, exposing his withered chest.

"Say the promise — and strike quickly while I pray," he begged. "See! It is a gentle weapon — so sharp and smooth that it will cause me little discomfort. And then you may say I did it, which will leave you without blame."

For an instant Peter thought Michael to be mad. But it was plain enough that the simplicity of the old man in

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his appeal for death was but his surrender to the inevitable.

Peter knew the lucidity of mind which comes with the agony of spirit. He knew how Michael's mind was working. The old man was in the grip of that clarity of mental vision which comes to the drowning man, or to the man who walks to execution. Peter had experienced the same phenomenon as he watched his father die twenty years before. The trivial things of every day, things never noticed before, had stood out with amazing distinctness and had registered in his brain a picture which had never vanished.

Peter remembered now the tiny stone he had seen in the snow near his dying father; the Cossack's boot which had been deeply scratched; the odor of raw fur from the sledges — even now the pungent scent was in his nostrils. The scene recurred to him now with overpowering intensity, and once more his old rage against Michael mounted. He reached forward and snatched the dagger from Michael's fingers.

"Good!" cried Michael. "You will promise — and strike!"

Then the old general began to whisper a prayer, and stretched out his arms, like a great bat preparing for flight.

Peter held the dagger in his hand, palm upward, and slightly extended before him, so that his elbow was a right angle with his upper arm, a pose somewhat similar to a man who holds a rapier in low carte ready to thrust forward the point. And he was close enough to Michael, so that if the arm was extended, the dagger would reach the old man.

While the two of them were thus confronting each other, a low scream broke upon the room — a full-throated cry of sudden and complete horror.

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Peter turned to see Katerin in the door which led to the Kirsakoffs' rooms. Her hands were thrown up and pressed against her cheeks, her staring eyes fastened upon the dagger in Peter's hands, her mouth still open with the horror of her cry, and her body transfixed into rigidity by the astounding situation in which she found her father and Peter. The catastrophe which she had planned so carefully to avert, had come now, she knew. The delicate structure she had devised had crashed down during her absence, and she saw that Peter and her father were at each other's throats, or so it appeared to her in the first glance she had of the interior of the room.

She had returned from making the final arrangements for their escape, in happy confidence that Peter would never discover their identity — and here was Peter about to slay her father. She saw an end to everything — the man she looked to for safety was now to destroy them.

She screamed again. It was a scream of utter hopelessness, a scream of black despair.

XXIV

A NEW TUNE ON AN OLD FIDDLE

PETER stood staring at Katerin, still holding the tiny dagger in his hand. A puzzled look had come into his face, as if he could not understand why she should scream. The mental shock which he had sustained in his discovery that the old man was Michael Kirsakoff, seemed to have closed some compartment of Peter's consciousness which included Katerin in her relationship to Michael. Now the full fact of her personality intruded itself upon him in relation to what had happened and Peter's brain needed time to readjust itself to a state of affairs in which Katerin must be considered.

He lifted his empty hand to his face and drew his fingers across his eyes in a motion that suggested brushing something away which interfered with his vision. He threw back his head and shook it slightly, as if to clear his brain of a vapor which befogged it. An infinite weariness gripped him, and his eyes regarded Katerin as if she were some specter which had formed out of thin air and now stood between him and his vengeance, possessed of a supernatural power to thwart him in his desires.

The first of the three to move was Michael. He slumped down into a chair, and, lifting a warning hand to Katerin, said weakly, "He has found us out!"

Her father's voice seemed to release Katerin from the grip of her terror, and she began to move forward toward Peter, with slow, even steps, her eyes upon the dagger in Peter's hand. There was no wariness about her, yet she had a quiet deliberation, as if she knew that it would be

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safer to make no sudden movement and so startle Peter into resistance.

Katerin approached Peter, and reaching for the dagger, put her hand upon its blade and drew it out of his fingers with the same gentle motion that a mother might use in taking a dangerous object from the hand of a child. And Peter relinquished the weapon, not so much in surrender as in a state of mind which was willing to forego for the present anything or any action in exchange for time to consider a new phase of the situation.

Katerin recognized the dagger, more by the quick side-wise glance she gave her father than by looking at the ivory hilt which stuck up between her thumb. She suspected that her father had drawn the weapon against Peter when he had discovered her father's identity, and that Peter had disarmed him. But she knew that just what had happened during her absence from the room did not matter now — the danger lay before her. She mistrusted Peter's temporary mood, and sought for an angle by which she might draw from him his attitude, or deflect him from any murderous intent. She knew that her father's life hung in the balance — and her own — while Peter stood there silently staring at her, grim and forbidding and gathering impetus for whatever form his next impulse would take.

"I trusted you!" she said quietly, and after she had uttered the words her mouth remained half open and her breath came gustily, like the breath of a runner who is spent at the end of an effort. She had been holding her breath since she had screamed in the doorway. She looked into his eyes.

Peter's lids flickered. His eyes were half closed, and still shot with red in the tiny blood-engorged veins at the sides. He looked at her dreamily, questioningly, and she thought with something of insolent defiance.

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Peter did not answer, but he moved his head slightly and looked past her at Michael, lips compressed, and the lids flickering.

"Peter Petrovitch — I love my father." Her voice was low, entreating, consoling, and carried an infinite desire that he understand her suffering.

"This is the end for us!" piped up Michael shrilly. "To the dead it does not matter how death has come — we shall take the poison!"

Michael lifted one hand before him, and with the other tore open a seam in the cuff of his shirt. Between his thumb and finger appeared a small white pellet.

Katerin was upon him instantly and took away the pellet.

"Not yet — by your own hand," she said gently, and putting one arm about his neck, bent and kissed him. She turned to Peter once more, her courage stronger, a vague hope growing within her. But her eyes were filled with tears.

"Would you kill my father? Would you do the work of Zorogoff, the Mongol? And see me surrendered to this half-blood Ataman? You! Peter Petrovitch — a Russian — a Russian from America!"

She was not so much asking him these things, as she was asking herself if he could do them. She was not afraid — she was hurt. It all seemed incomprehensible to her — that any Russian could ally himself with Zorogoff, could commit a murder such as he had planned. She understood now that she had not been brave in her dealings with him, but that she had never allowed herself to believe he could be dangerous even though her dexterous manipulation of him were exposed.

"Katerin Stephanovna!" said Peter, gazing at her with a trace of surprised awe in his tone and his look. "You — are Katerin Stephanovna!"

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She divined something of what was passing through his mind — he was thinking of her as a little girl, in the old days in Chita. A look of hope flashed across her face, though she took care that she did not betray to him that she saw an advantage.

“I am Katerin Stephanovna,” she said, with a lift of her chin. She stood beside her father, one hand upon his shoulder to restrain him against any action, and yet in a posture which suggested defense.

“The same little girl — who was in the sledge — that morning of the almanacs and ——” went on Peter.

Her mind leaped ahead of him as he paused — she knew now that he was mentally reconstructing the scene of his father’s death, and that from it would accrue a new burst of hate, a fresh impetus which might compel him to action against the restraint which her presence had interposed between him and her father. She left her father and moved toward Peter, seeking to distract his thoughts by drawing his attention to her.

“Are you a true Russian?” she demanded passionately, as she approached him. “Are you a man of my race?”

He seemed startled by the question, and once more his hand brushed his brow.

“Russian?” he repeated simply, almost helplessly, as if it were something that it had never occurred to him before to question. He looked down at his uniform, and then lifted a khaki sleeve to study the brown band of tape at the cuff, the band of an officer’s sleeves.

“Why, yes — I am Peter Petrovitch,” he said finally.

He stepped to the window and looked out upon the Sofistkaya, and at the flattened gable-end of the little hut below which had been his and his father’s. Katerin drew close to him, and putting her hand softly upon his arm, looked into his face. Her own was drawn with suffering, and glistened with fresh tears.

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"Peter Petrovitch," she whispered, "you look upon a new Russia — the one you knew has gone. The old prison on the hill is empty! Empty! Thank God for it! What more can you do?"

He looked directly at her, and studied her face for a minute, his own face still reamed with the lines of the hatred which held his nerves taut.

"You trusted me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You deceived me," he retorted, once more himself and completely readjusted to the meaning of her return.

"Yes. To save my father. But I trusted you, too, else I could have avoided you. I would give my life to save my father, but it is too late now — I can neither save him nor myself. We live only so long as Zorogoff delays in coming."

"You speak to thwart me," he said bitterly.

She turned her palms upward in a gesture of submission and the slightest shrug of her shoulders, as if she had lost all interest in what the final result of what she said might be, and as if what he might do was a matter of little moment to her.

"I speak to save your soul," she said softly. "But we shall not quarrel about it — either what you are to decide about us, or about your soul."

"No?" he demanded, surprised that he should be nettled by her carelessness. "But you are pleading with me now."

She gave him a look of surprise and laughed harshly.

"Pleading? For what? A few hours of life?"

"You might both escape," he suggested, "by the droshky which you have so cleverly planned. That is, if I should let you go."

"We could not get through without you. And what does it matter whether the Ataman Zorogoff kills my

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father in the morning, or you kill him now. No, Peter Petrovitch, I plead only to save you from blood upon your hands — and to save your own life — the life of an American officer.”

At this, he thought of Wassili and smiled.

“I mean Zorogoff,” she hastened to say. “He would not let you escape, if you gave him reason to destroy you — if you killed my father.”

“You can argue for Zorogoff, who will destroy you both?” he asked, making no attempt to mask his incredulity.

She lifted her shoulders again in that same almost imperceptible shrug, and looked casually out of the window.

“You can help America help our people,” she said. “As for Zorogoff, I have death ready at my bidding for myself before he could take me to his palace — I can defeat the dog of a Mongol. But what do you gain by your vengeance upon my father? A few hours of his life! Is that the measure of the value of your vengeance?”

“You think that I am too late — that I am already defeated in my purpose,” he said.

“Yes. You are, Peter Petrovitch. Time has defeated you.”

“No,” he insisted. “I have waited twenty years ——”

“And after twenty years, you come back to what? Michael Kirsakoff and his daughter hiding from his Cossacks! The old governor, worse off than peasants, with death lurking at the door! The general of the Czar’s army, in flight and hiding like one of his own escapes in the old days! What sweeter vengeance would you ask, Peter Petrovitch?”

She spoke of her father and herself in the third person, as if she were already separated from life and saw her-

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self in the detachment of death, looking back upon her father's and her own end.

"True, times have changed," said Peter grimly.

"Yet you had no hand in it," she said daringly, conscious that what she said might lift his wrath again. "The tree of hate has borne its own bitter fruit, and a gale of death sweeps the land ——"

"Ay, the wheel has turned!" cried Michael from his chair. "And the water has returned to the sea! My sins are my own, and judgment is before me. But I have offered my life to you, Peter Gorekin, for ——"

"Do not heed him!" said Katerin to Peter hastily, as she saw his eyes flame with sudden anger.

"I have come all the way from America to hear him," said Peter. "Am I to be cheated ——"

"America!" cried Katerin with fervor, clapping her hands together. "You, a Russian! Have come from America! And what are you to do with what America has given you?"

"And what has it given me?" he demanded in surprise.

"America has given you its trust—you, the poor son of an exile, by the coat you wear, are an officer—a gentleman! Ah, Peter Petrovitch, I had hoped that America had changed your heart as well as your coat—and taken something from you."

"And what should it take?"

He scanned her face, seeking her purpose in holding his attention away from Michael. Her eyes held infinite sadness, and seemed to have lost any sense of terror. Her face had softened in final resignation, and he saw her for the first time in her own nature—the serene calmness which belongs to the Russian aristocrat, who is essentially a fatalist.

"I have heard much of America," she said dreamily, her eyes on the window but her vision not extending be-

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yond the glass. "I hoped that you, who are of my own race, should learn a new lesson in America — that the spirit of America should take from you that love of destruction, that love for vengeance which is so strong in our people. Countless millions have been willing to die, and have died for Holy Russia. When is the Slav to learn that he must live for Holy Russia?"

"Ah, those who have ruled Russia have just begun to learn how precious is life," said Peter. "I learned the lesson out there in the Sofistkaya twenty years ago — it is you who are learning now — from me — and your Cossacks!"

"Yes, I know Shimilin has been here," she said wearily. "We have come to the end. I cannot ask you to save us, even if you could or would. That is done."

"You were willing — when you went down to arrange for the droshky. You could smile when you thought I was deceived." His manner with her was easier now, and he seemed to be toying with the situation, testing her bravery.

"Yes, it was all a woman has against a man — a smile for a shield. And you thought you were deceiving me — you would tell to Rimsky what you would not tell to Vashka the samovar girl."

"Vashka the samovar girl!" he repeated. "Vashka, telling me of Kirsakoff — a tall man in uniform, with black mustaches — a man in his full strength, stalwart — the cruel Governor who was behind the government of Zorogoff!"

"You were secretly seeking my father. It was my duty to learn your secret before you learned ours — a fair game."

"True!" he admitted.

"I would save you now from the Ataman." She gave him a quick and eager look. He misread her intent, when

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he thought she was turning his mind into new channels.

"Save me!" He was incredulous, and once more on the alert against some new plan to entrap him.

"Yes, to save you, Peter Petrovitch! If Zorogoff knows that you had our story, when we are dead, he will fear your knowledge against him — and destroy you."

"You should think of my safety at this time! Why?"

She bent her head and turned from him, but he took both her arms and swung her so that she had to look into his face. But she evaded his glance, though she did not resist his grasp.

"I can tell you now because of the barrier between us," she said.

"Barrier?" He was frankly puzzled.

"The blood of your father and your desire for vengeance stands between us — that is why I can tell you, Peter Petrovitch, that — I loved you ——"

His hands loosened upon her arms, and a flood of tears was upon her — silent tears, which shook her frame. And Peter seized her again and threw his arms about her with crushing ferocity.

"Katerin! Katerin!" he cried, and the next instant released her as suddenly as he had swept her to him.

"Oh, God!" he cried, throwing up his clenched fists in a gust of fury. "Have I been brought to my enemy, only to be tormented? What am I to do, my father, what ——?"

Michael had leaped from his chair with a cry, and faced Peter.

"What? What?" demanded the old general. "There is love — love between you two — my daughter ——!" He was too shaken to frame more words, and his voice wavered and broke and lost itself in the depths of his throat. He stood with his frail legs bending under him, his mouth wide open and his chin quivering, gulping for

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breath to give him energy to express the emotions which shook his body and rendered him powerless to express himself.

Katerin flung herself at him to sustain and calm him, still fearful that Peter might attack under the slightest provocation — and she was in terror lest her father would give vent to an outburst of anger.

“I shall speak!” he said gently to Katerin, and at once he was strong again, as if he had rallied the last bit of his energy for his new venture of resistance. Katerin let him go on toward Peter, who stood waiting to see what the old man might have to say.

Michael sank to his knees before Peter, and held up his arms imploringly, while words began flowing from his agitated lips in a torrent.

“Give heed to what I say,” he cried beseechingly. “You, too, are a Russian! Look upon me, who once was your Governor! Have compassion upon me who am now but a bit of dried mud cast upon the road by the wheel of Time! Have mercy ——”

“So you have learned what it is to ask for mercy, Michael Alexandrovitch! But you have yet to learn what it means to have mercy denied,” taunted Peter.

“It is not mercy that I ask for myself, Gorekin,” went on Michael. “But you love my daughter — and I stand between you! Save her! Save her from the Mongol. And leave me, who am but some of the wreckage of Holy Russia, to suffer the wrath of this Zorogoff!”

“We two shall die together, my father — your fate shall be mine,” said Katerin, “or I shall die by my own hand.”

“You saw me in the old days, Gorekin,” went on Michael in disregard of Katerin. “Were those days worse than these? I obeyed my orders. I held my power by the word of the Czar, and I bore his sword. Now I have lived

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beyond my time. My day is done. I am not of these days. How does it matter the manner of my end? I shall soon be with your father — I, Kirsakoff the Governor, with Gorekin the bootmaker and the political — in the hills above us. Then let God judge my sins, as will yours be judged! Take my daughter — she is all I have to give for the debt that is due you, yes, overdue! I am old, but my eyes still see, and I see that you two love! Take my Katerin Stephanovna to America, Peter Petrovitch! Flee, both of you ——”

Katerin gave a warning cry and sprang toward the door leading into her room. She had caught the sound of running feet from the hall — feet in panic flight.

“Hush!” she warned. “Some one comes!”

Slipitsky, his black cap missing from the top of his head, and his eyes telling of his dread for something which pursued him, burst into the room. He clapped his hands to his temples in frantic despair in a gesture of hopelessness, too short of breath still from running to tell what he feared.

“The Ataman!” he gasped. “God’s doom is upon us!”

XXV

THE FINAL RECKONING

THE door leading to the hall was flung open. Shimilin, the Cossack captain, stood on the threshold, and behind him was a group of his wild-looking soldiers, their heads hooded with wrappings of furs, and the points of their shining bayonets bristling about their shoulders.

Shimilin did not advance, but remained in the doorway, coldly surveying those inside the room. He gave each of them a casual glance — Michael, Katerin, Peter, and even the shivering Slipitsky who stood cowering against the wall and whispering to himself through trembling lips and fingering his beard in nervous terror.

“The Ataman Zorogoff!” announced Shimilin, and the soldiers behind him opened a narrow lane, as Shimilin stepped aside and into the room.

The Ataman pushed through the guards, and strode into the room, looking straight at Peter, stern and challenging. The Mongol chieftain’s greatcoat was off, and his somewhat fantastic costume betrayed his childish love for personal display. Rising from the swarthy forehead was the towering white cap of long hairy wool, studded in the center of its flat front by a wide slab of crudely hammered gold half the size of a man’s hand, and in it set a diamond. At his left side hung a tremendous scimitar with a hilt-knot of gold fiber swinging from the guard. He wore a snuff-brown tunic with big brass buttons, blue riding breeches with double stripes of gold braid down the sides, and heavy black boots fitted with wheel-like

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spurs of silver. His shoulders were covered with broad straps of gold cloth. In his belt were a pair of pistols, the butts sticking up from the tops of uncovered holsters. An order of the Czar hung from the top of a tunic pocket, an odd link between the shattered empire and this usurper, who was crafty enough to display upon his person something which still had a meaning to many of his followers and reflected a trace of the vanished glory of the throne.

A pair of gold devices gleamed upon the standing collar of the tunic of the Ataman, and his long black hair which fringed his ears, was all the blacker for the whiteness of the woolly cap.

Zorogoff marched toward Peter, his boots pounding the floor belligerently, his small black eyes burning with a glittering menace. But he stopped when he could have put out his hand and touched Peter — stopped with an abrupt and final thump of the heel of his left boot as he planted it close beside the right boot.

"There is the American officer," said Shimilin, still standing by the door. "That is the man, sir, who sent the message."

Some of the soldiers edged into the room and grounded their rifles with jarring thuds, and the others outside in the hall pressed forward, thrusting their heads in.

Peter bowed. "I am Lieutenant Gordon of the American army," he said with cold formality, and returned the Ataman's angry stare.

"I have come to hear you oppose my will," growled Zorogoff, a wicked twist to the corner of his lips, and venom in his eyes.

"And what is your will, sir?" demanded Peter, putting enough deference into his words and manner to prevent Zorogoff from having any complaint on the ground of lack of civility or respect.

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"My officers report that you have been in my city several days. You come here as an American and ignore me and my government."

"I can assure you that you will not be ignored by the American army, sir," said Peter.

"Do you, representing the American army, dare tell my officers what they may not do?"

"I requested your officer not to arrest General Kirsakoff and his daughter in my room. They came here to talk with me, and till I have finished talking with them, your officers must not interfere, sir."

Zorogoff's breathing became audible to Peter, and he saw the flat nostrils of the Ataman twitch, and growing anger flashing in his eyes. But he did not take his eyes from Peter's, nor was there the slightest change of expression in the Mongol's immobile face after that lifting of the nostrils. Behind the Ataman stood Shimilin, smiling sneeringly over the shoulder of his chief, in an obvious attempt to break through Peter's armor of stolid patience.

"My officers must not interfere!" echoed the Ataman. "Is it that I take orders from the Americans?"

"No, it is not an order, but ——"

"Good!" blustered the Ataman. "It is not an order!"

"It is not an order," went on Peter, in the same even tones. "But you must take care that you do not interfere with American officers. I tell you now, sir, that if these people are arrested in my room, I shall demand to know the reason for their arrest, that they are properly charged and tried, and given the right to a proper defense. Otherwise it may appear to the Russian people that an American officer has betrayed this old man and his daughter to you, and delivered them into your hands. I cannot prevent you from arresting them, from executing them

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if you wish, but I can reveal to the commander of the American army and to the people of America, the methods of your rule, sir."

"I rule here, and in my own way. I ask no help in ruling from the Americans," grunted Zorogoff.

"And the Americans are vitally interested in *how* you rule, sir," retorted Peter.

"I rule as I please, with account to no one!" raged Zorogoff. "Captain Shimilin! Take the old man and the woman!"

"Wait!" cried Peter, throwing up his hand to Shimilin. "You are invading my room! I claim the only right to give orders here!"

"I take Russian subjects where I find them, and I do with them as I see fit!" thundered Zorogoff, his face seeming to swell with rage at Peter's words.

Captain Shimilin turned as if to obey the Ataman's order, but he hesitated, the same sneering smile upon his lips. He appeared much amused at Peter's defiance, and only too willing to let him further enrage the Ataman.

"You speak of subjects of Russia, sir," said Peter, addressing Zorogoff. "Am I to have the honor of reporting that the Ataman Zorogoff occupies the throne of all the Russias? And perhaps part of Mongolia?"

Zorogoff made a grimace, and the flesh about his eyes crinkled tightly. Peter saw that he had struck a vital spot in the pride of Zorogoff, and had touched upon a matter which revealed some of Zorogoff's power as a pretender — his strength came from his affinity with Asiatic people through his Asiatic blood. His leadership was racial, for he was exploiting his Mongol heritage and behind him were princes of ancient Tartary whispering against white ascendancy in their own land.

"That is the Russian speaking," said Zorogoff, "not

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the American! You turned your back on your own people, and come now in a strange coat to give orders with ——”

“I came to give you warning that America will not allow you to persecute and kill a helpless old man and a defenseless woman! To keep your hands off helpless ——” Peter checked himself in sheer wonderment at his own words — he who had come to kill the helpless old father of Katerin, suddenly found himself defending the very man he had waited twenty years to slay! “America will not allow you to persecute and kill,” he repeated weakly, as if it were an idea which he had just discovered! And he had! For the first time in his life he had been able to express the Americanism which he had acquired in twenty years. It was something that had overgrown his spirit and had smothered all unknowingly to him the smoldering fires within him which impelled him finally to seek the blood vengeance of the Slav!

“Take the Kirsakoffs away!” ordered Zorogoff, turning to Shimilin in the instant of what seemed to him Peter’s indecision. “No Russian, even in an American uniform, can oppose my will here, or ——”

A small object came hurtling through the air past Peter, and struck the Ataman in the face. It was a heavy pocket-knife, with the blades closed, and its end, capped with curved grooves, left three short gashes parallel in the cheek of Zorogoff, before it ricocheted against the wall and clattered to the floor.

Michael sprang forward closely after the missile which he had hurled at the Ataman, and thrust forward his fists, past Peter.

“God’s curse upon you!” screamed Michael, his voice rising to a shrill shriek. The Ataman stepped back, and put his hands to his face, and then looked at the tips of his fingers covered with blood. He regarded them

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thoughtfully for the fraction of a second, a look of surprise in his eyes.

Shimilin spoke in restraint to his soldiers, for they had started forward into the room, their bayonets coming up aslant.

Michael pushed forward and thrust his fists into the Ataman's face, the body of the old general coming between Peter and Zorogoff, so that Peter's view of Zorogoff was temporarily cut off. And in that time Zorogoff drew a pistol, and fired, the crash of its report booming out above the startled cries of Katerin and Slipitsky and the high-pitched shrilling of Michael at his enemy. Zorogoff's bullet almost lifted Michael from his feet, being fired from the hip and upward into Michael's breast. The old general swung half round and then staggered backward and fell with startling impact across the low writing table.

Peter turned to look after Michael, just as Katerin came plunging toward the Ataman, who stood partly hidden in a cloud of gray smoke. Peter caught the flash of the naked blade — the blade of the small dagger which Michael had handed to Peter and which had been taken from Peter's hand by Katerin.

Peter clutched after her, fearful of the consequences of another attack upon Zorogoff. But she eluded his grasp, and lunged straight forward into the smoke about Zorogoff, to bury the dagger to its hilt in the Ataman's neck at the base of the standing collar of his tunic.

Zorogoff gave a gurgling cry and the heavy pistol fell from his hand. He threw up his arms and then clawed at his throat as his knees gave beneath him — and pitched forward at Peter's feet to the ringing clatter of the great scimitar against the floor.

Peter caught Katerin in his arms as she reeled back, and held her, his left hand flying to his own pistol to be

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ready against the expected attack from Shimilin and the soldiers. But Shimilin stood with his arm raised to hold the soldiers in check, his eyes upon the dying Ataman.

Peter stood thus holding Katerin for a minute, as she cried incoherently. Slipitsky had run to Michael and had lifted the old general down into a chair and the moans of the stricken general came above the wailing of the Jew. Peter gave no heed to them but held his pistol with the barrel half downward and watched the soldiers pressed about the door, fearing that Shimilin would not prevent them from using their rifles. Peter knew well that there was no hope of coming out of a fight alive, but he knew that a weapon had a restraining effect if not aimed at any particular person.

The Ataman lay face down upon the floor, his back hunching up spasmodically, as if he were struggling to get to his feet. At times he drew his knees up, and then his toes would slip back and he would fall upon the scimitar with a musical clang, his life gurgling out through his lips in a crimson stream. Presently he lay still, stretched out at full length, his spurs sticking up from the heels of his boots, the gold knot of the scimitar hilt at his left side, and the toe of the scabbard showing at the right, and his great white cap near his head on the floor.

Shimilin spoke first. "Go and tell Bouran that the Ataman is dead," he ordered one of his men. "But let no one else know. You others stand outside and let no one enter or have knowledge of what has happened here."

Katerin recovered herself and slipped from Peter's arm. She looked round wildly, and then went to her father. He lay back against the chair, held upright by Slipitsky, though the old general's body swayed from side to side as he was gripped by the tremors of his agony. His hands were clutched to his breast, holding the old peasant's coat against his wound.

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Peter followed after Katerin, for he felt now that whatever Shimilin intended against them in retaliation for the killing of the Ataman would not come in the form of summary action. Katerin was on her knees before her father, speaking to him tenderly in her anguish for him, and at times sobbing out prayers.

Michael opened his eyes and stared up at Peter, and let his hands fall upon Katerin's head. A spasm of pain crossed his graying face, and he opened his mouth several times before he could speak.

"Save her!" he gasped to Peter. "Now I — no longer stand between you — forgive — forgive ——" His breath failed him, and his breast heaved as he was shook by a mighty convulsion.

"Die in peace, Michael Kirsakoff," said Peter. "I forgive."

Michael recovered himself for a brief space.

"Good!" he whispered. "Every man has his wolf to kill, but it is better — I was but a millstone hanging from her neck — but now you can save her — you forgive ——"

"As I hope to be forgiven, I forgive," said Peter, putting his face down close to Michael. "Do you hear me, Michael Alexandrovitch?"

A smile came into Michael's pain-tortured face — a smile of helpless assent, with which was mingled his joy at Peter's words. But still he was troubled, and his head shook with his effort to express his further wishes.

"Save her — from the Ataman!" he pleaded.

"The Ataman is dead," said Peter. "Look! There upon the floor!"

Michael's eyes roved as Peter stepped aside, and finally rested upon the prone body of Zorogoff.

"A-h-h!" cried Michael. "The Ataman submits to the general of his Emperor! My Katerin, do not be sad for me — let the birds sing for both of you — I go happy

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— God's blessing upon you both — Gorekin — I, who go to meet the dead, sal — ute ——”

Shimilin came and stood beside Peter. The Cossack captain drew off his cap, crossed himself, and uttered a few words of prayer. Michael's dimming eyes saw him — and revealed a new terror.

“Shimilin!” he gasped.

“Have no fear of me, Michael Alexandrovitch,” said Shimilin. “You, nor your daughter need have no fear of me.”

Peter glanced at Shimilin in surprise, for the Cossack captain was strangely gentle and sympathetic for a man who might be expected to take vengeance for the slaying of his chief.

“I saved you both from Zorogoff, the time at the house,” said Shimilin. “It was I who prevented an execution because you would not give up your money. If you had trusted me and given me the money, I would have protected you, for I could have been Ataman then — as I am the Ataman now.”

“You have succeeded Zorogoff?” asked Peter, in startled amazement.

“I am the new Ataman,” repeated Shimilin. “We Cossacks had a plot, but all was not ready ——”

“God's blessing — on — my little ——”

Michael's head fell forward upon his chest, and he was dead.

Katerin gave a wailing cry and put her hands tenderly upon the cheeks of her father. Peter and Shimilin turned away to leave her with her dead, while Slipitsky stole out into the other room to return with the icon from the corner in which stood Michael's bed. The Jew put the sacred image into the wasted hands of him who had been Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff, governor and general of the Czars in the Valley of Despair.

XXVI

FAREWELL

THE morning was cold and foggy. Through the gray and frozen haze came the sounds of voices, the creaking of boots, the jangle of a distant bell from the horses of a troika — a ghostly world filled with ghostly shapes, hidden, yet full of unseen life. It was just such a morning as that one in the past when Peter Petrovitch waited for the Czar's mail, and the column of unfortunates went clanking out into the wilderness to cut wood under a guard of Cossack soldiers.

And he who had been Peter Petrovitch sat this morning by the window of his room in the Dauria Hotel and gazed out over the world of floating mists — Lieutenant Peter Gordon of the United States Army. In the hall, outside his door, were two tall Cossack soldiers with their rifles, on guard.

A week had passed since the killing of the Ataman Zorogoff and the death of Kirsakoff. There had been a mutiny and an attempt by partisans of Zorogoff to kill Shimilin, the new Ataman. But the Cossacks were behind Shimilin, and the Mongols and other bandits who had stood with Zorogoff found their power broken, their intrigues betrayed and their leaders dead after firing squads. The survivors fled up and down the railroad. The régime of Zorogoff was at an end, with its looting, its terrorism, its mailed fist which demanded tribute in exchange for protection.

The body of Zorogoff was not buried in Chita. The second day after his death, there appeared in the city,

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from down Urga way, a lama from Outer Mongolia with frosty whiskers, a pinnacle cap and a greatcoat of fine fur with sleeves which reached to the ground. He came with a retinue mounted on camels, and the leading man held aloft a small purple banner which caused many men to submit their necks when they saw it pass. For somewhere down in the mountains to the south in the khanates of the Kalkas tribes, there was a Prince, and when he spoke, it was an order — an order to be obeyed.

And this lama of grave face and the tall cap summoned the Ataman Shimilin and bartered for the body of Zorogoff, who was half Mongol by blood, and that half of interest to the holy men of Forbidden Tibet. Shimilin, being wise in such things, knew how much he could ask to the ultimate jewel — and got it. And as the lama traded with Shimilin, there were hints of many more men from Mongolia lurking outside the city, hidden by the fog. A line of tiny fires gleamed at the edge of the plain, the Cossack outposts heard the grunting of baggage camels, and the murmur of countless voices drifted in through the fog.

So Zorogoff's body was slung up between the humps of a Bactrian camel, and the animal went swaying off through the mist, with Zorogoff's head nodding at the ground of ancient Tartary in his last farewell.

Of these things Peter knew little. He was still in danger, as was Katerin, for there were many in Chita who sought a way to avenge Zorogoff. There were few persons who knew Katerin had killed him, but such knowledge spreads easily in Asia, where there are so many ears listening, so many eyes watching, so many tongues whispering in strange tongues. So Shimilin kept a guard over the hotel, and in it, to see that Peter and Katerin were well protected.

And Peter had seen little of Katerin during the week.

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He had attended the military funeral at daybreak which Shimilin had granted the old general. Katerin was there, hidden and hemmed in among the Cossacks who had served under her father. Few knew who was being buried in the cemetery on the hillside above the ruin of the old prison. So it was that General Kirsakoff became a part of the Valley of Despair which he had ruled.

Katerin seemed to avoid Peter after the funeral. She kept to her own rooms, with Wassili, except the night they went with Shimilin and his soldiers to the old log house and retrieved the fortune in rubles which was hidden in the stove.

Peter waited till the days had softened her sorrow. He knew she wanted to be alone with her thoughts, as he did with his own. He had no way of knowing how her thoughts would turn in relation to him, but one fact made him happy — Katerin was safe for the time being. He did not know that she possessed a fortune, and he supposed that she would want to remain in Chita. He did not want her to feel any debt toward him for having helped her against the Ataman Zorogoff, and he did not want to presume upon the fact that while she was under the stress of death she had admitted her love for him. There was a barrier between them he well knew — the barrier of the circumstance that Peter would never have been in Chita if he had not sought to kill her father; and behind that, the circumstance that Peter had held her father responsible for the killing of his own father, and his own imprisonment. Peter knew there was nothing which could wipe out those accursed facts, and that they would hover over all thoughts Katerin might have for him. He saw himself fettered by bonds of his own making — and in the gyves of his love for her.

And how much he loved Katerin was just beginning to break upon him with the full fury of an emotion which had

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long been pent within his heart. He had loved Russia and his own kind; not the machinery of government which had been known as Russia, but the land, the very soil — hills, plains, and valleys. This love of his homeland was now centered upon Katerin, for she had become to him a personification of his own Russia, stricken and deserted by the rest of the world. And he was possessed of a passion to make amends for the vengeance which he nursed against her father. He longed to cherish and protect Katerin, to show her the land which had done so much for him, to take her by the hand and walk with her in the streets of the city where he learned that every man may work out his own destiny without the handicap of a system of government which measures what each man may do and not do according to the rank of his father — the land where the boy from a cabin may become a Lincoln!

In his soul, Peter felt that he had betrayed America. Though he had not killed Kirsakoff, Peter suffered torment that Katerin knew how madly he had sought to kill. And he feared that she would blame America, and not him, for keeping alive that love for vengeance.

He passed the days pacing the floor of his room, or sitting by the window. At times he was tempted to quit the city and never see Katerin again. But he could not do it. He preferred to take his punishment by having her tell him to go — at least, he could fill that place in his consciousness which had harbored hatred for Michael Kirsakoff with the sorrow that Kirsakoff's daughter loved him yet would not face life with him. He felt that it would all be easier to bear if he carried with him a memory of his parting from her which would always lash him for the dreadful plan which he had devised and all but carried out.

As he sat there by the window this morning, there

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came a knock at the door. He admitted a messenger from Ataman Shimilin — a tall young Cossack with boyish face and filled with pride at the thought that once more his own people controlled the city. He saluted and clicked his polished steel spurs quite as if he were in the presence of royalty.

“From the Ataman!” he announced, and bowed as he handed a letter to Peter. It read:

I send two officers of my staff to-day to Vladivostok to make report to the American commander that I, Shimilin, am now Ataman, and that my government shall be just. I have taken the private car of Zorogoff, and knowing that you intend to return to Vladivostok soon, perhaps you would like to travel by this wagon. It is advisable to go aboard the car, which now stands in the station yards, while the fog still holds, and be picked up by the next train. If you have any friends to go with you, the station commandant is at your orders. The Irkutsk train for Vladivostok will be here within an hour, and it will pick up one of my armored cars for safety. Perhaps you will be able to report to your superiors that all Cossacks are not robbers and that we desire only the salvation of our Russia. I salute you and America.

SHIMILIN, Ataman.

Peter stepped to the writing table, picked up a pen, and wrote on a slip of paper:

I shall go at once. Thank you for the kindness. I hope to see the Ataman before I depart from his city.

PETER GORDON, Lieutenant.

The messenger bowed, clicked, and left the room, and Peter gathered his blankets and made them into a roll. Then he paused a minute, thoughtfully — and finally knocked upon the door leading to Katerin's rooms.

The old serving woman who had been at the log house opened the door just enough to peep through.

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"Tell your mistress that the American officer wishes to say good-by, please," said Peter, and the door closed at once.

Peter was stricken with chagrin and disappointment. He thought that Katerin might not see him and had given her orders to that effect to her servant. He had expected that the door would open for him — and it had closed upon his request to see Katerin. He stood for a moment, wondering if he should not go down to Slipitsky at once, pay his bill, and go on to the car which stood in the station yard.

Then the door opened, and Katerin herself stood before him — a Katerin that he had never seen. She wore now, instead of the poor garments in which he had seen her as a samovar girl, the beautiful purple velvet gown which reached to her slippers. Her hair was high upon her head, dressed in the style of a Russian lady so that it suggested a crown — lifted from the front and turned back smoothly against the mass, and then drawn down tightly across the ears. Tall, slender, and stately she was now, such a woman as might be a princess of the blood. Hanging from her neck was a gorgeous string of pearls, and from her fingers gleamed jeweled rings. And Peter's heart sank as his eyes rested upon her, for once again he realized with a pang that, after all, he was but Peter Petrovitch, son of a poor exile, and Katerin Stephanovna was of the Russian nobility. He saw a new barrier between them, and one which he had forgotten in his recent thoughts of her.

The joy which had come into his face at first glance at her was dissipated by his realization that this was the end for them, and he bowed a most formal bow.

She held out her hand to him, and he took it, like a man in a trance, but conscious of the jewels on her fingers.

"You are going away?" she said, with concern in her

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eyes — a concern which he knew to be politeness. She was still pale, he thought, and wistfully sad for her father.

“Yes,” he said. “I am to go — Shimilin sends me word that a private car is in the yards and ——” He let his eyes wander to the figure of the serving woman, who was lurking behind the curtains which led to the far room. He wondered what he could say for she seemed so comfortable now with her servants — the old woman and Wassili — and so self-sufficient. How could she be otherwise than rich, he thought, with such clothes and such jewels? He wished that she had kept her clothes as a samovar girl, and then he might have found it possible to give utterance to some of the words which pressed him to be said. He would have found it much easier to blurt out what was in his heart if she had not been so grand and disconcerting in that velvet gown. He sensed a hurt within himself that she had done this — could it be that she had dressed herself deliberately for their meeting so that he should find it easy to keep his place?

“You have called to say good-by,” she said, and drew aside slightly. “Then you must come in — and we shall have a glass of tea.” Then, as if she divined what was in his mind about her changed appearance, she added, “We Kirsakoff’s never mourn our dead with garments — an old custom of our warrior clan — instead, we wear our best, out of respect for those who have gone — and these poor things are the best I have. So please do not think it strange. Wassili! Fire the samovar and fetch fresh water for a guest of the house!”

“But are you safe?” burst out Peter. “You are in danger enough from those who may know you killed the Ataman, without revealing your jewels and your good clothes! There may be a rising against Shimilin at any time — the Bolsheviki — the bandits from Mongolia! It

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is too bad that you have put on these clothes — for your own safety!”

“You are afraid I shall be killed because I killed Zorogoff?” she asked, with the ghost of a smile on her lips.

“Yes, I am afraid,” he went on earnestly. “You should have remained in the dress of a samovar girl ——”

“Oh, but I have done playing at being a samovar girl,” she laughed. “If I am to die, I shall die as a Kirsakoff, and not as a servant. So you are leaving the city soon?”

“I am leaving at once. Shimilin has sent me word that a private car is in the yards — and I cannot disregard such a hint, for he may mean it as a command. And — why don’t you go too?”

“I? Go? Where?” she seemed amazed at the idea.

“To Vladivostok. You would be safe there, and safe on the train. Take this chance to escape from the city, while Shimilin has control.”

She sat down and gestured him to a chair before her.

“I, too, have heard from Shimilin — about the car. But I shall not go.”

Peter’s face showed his disappointment. He had hoped that she might be induced to leave Chita, and by getting away from the scene of her father’s death and her old home, her memory of why Peter had gone to the city would be dimmed. Now he saw that she was determined to let him go his way — she wanted to see him no more, she wanted to forget him. And yet, he remembered, she had told him she loved him! He wondered if it were possible that she had admitted a love only because she wanted to save her father. Was that what she had meant when she said she had done with playing at being a samovar girl? That she had done with duplicity because there was no further necessity for duping him?

“It is a pity that you will not go,” he said wearily. He regretted that he had asked to see her at all, for he

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suspected that she was inclined to laugh at him now because as a samovar girl she had been able to deceive him so thoroughly.

"At least, I shall not go now," she said. "Perhaps later — for there will be nothing to keep me here now."

"Then come!" he pleaded, leaning forward, and holding out his hand. "I know what there is between us — Katerin. I know now how wrong I was about your father — I can claim no credit for having helped you the little I did — I want no credit — but I was blind with hate for the old régime. Now I wish to help you ——"

He stopped and shook his head, seeing that he was not giving her help to get away from the city — Shimilin had already done that if he had offered her the use of the private car. It struck him now that perhaps her suggestion that she might leave later had something to do with his going now — she did not want to travel with him.

She sat tapping her fingers on the arm of the chair and looking at the rings on her hand, reflectively, yet with something that told she had already made up her mind as to what she should do and that they were talking to no purpose.

"I tell you," he began again. "I shall not go with the car, if you will consent to leave for Vladivostok. If you prefer that I should not ——"

"No, you must not stay here," she said.

"But I shall stay if you do not go!" he cried.

She gave him a startled look. "Stay? Why, you cannot stay here always. I thought you came to say good-by."

He stood up. "If you wish it, it shall be good-by," he said. "But I am not going away."

"You must not be absurd," she said, and stood up also, a faint trace of color in her cheeks. "Why should you remain here?"

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* "Because I care for your safety, that's why! I promised your father that I would protect you and ——"

She tossed her head back, and regarded him through half-closed lids.

"You may consider yourself released from that promise," she said. "You owe no debt — do not trouble yourself on that score, because ——"

"Katerin!" he cried, holding out his hands to her imploringly. "You know what I mean — you know that your father desired your safety! Then let us forget my promise, but ——"

"You do not make your promises to keep them, is that it? Then you are not bound by anything, Peter ——" She shrugged her shoulders and turned her face from him.

"Go on!" he commanded. "You were going to say 'Peter Petrovitch.' Why have you turned against me? Katerin, I love you, and even if you will let what has happened stand between us, I want to see that you escape ——"

"You but want to keep your promise to my father, and you think only of what he may have desired about me!" she retorted with a show of anger, her face aflame. "You have no debt to a Kirsakoff, living or dead, in any way! Do I owe you anything? Perhaps I do, but I can pay you! What price, I ask? What price, Peter Petrovitch Gorekin?"

He stood dumfounded and gazed at her. She turned abruptly, and opened the top of a trunk which he had not seen before.

"What price?" she demanded.

"Price! Price!" he gasped. "Why, you owe me nothing! Please do not insult me — I wished to see you again — I wished to say good-by — please, mistress ——" the word escaped him, — the word of deference to the

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upper class, the word of recognition that she was impossibly above him in the Russian social caste.

She let the top of the trunk fall, and putting her hands to her face, burst into tears. Just then Wassili stuck his head through the green curtains and looked in, startled and angry. Peter was about to reassure the *moujik* that no harm threatened his mistress, but before Peter could speak, Wassili burst through the curtains and he held in his hand a great knife. The Slavic battle rage took possession of Peter at sight of the knife, and all the restraints imposed upon him by civilized life left him in one mad instant. He knew but one thing — he loved Katerin, and Wassili was going to stand in the way. The blade in the *moujik's* hand swept away all the fine perplexities which had harassed Peter — these points of honor which he saw as a barrier between him and Katerin. He snapped out his pistol and pointed it at Wassili.

“Get back through that curtain!” he commanded, and stepped forward toward Wassili. The *moujik* pressed back, but did not leave the room.

“What’s this?” cried Katerin, turning upon Peter angrily.

He made no reply, but shifting his pistol into his left hand, he kept Wassili covered with the weapon. Then he paused for an instant. Before Katerin or Wassili understood his intent, Peter seized her with his right arm and lifted her against his shoulder. With his left elbow under his head, he kept the muzzle of the pistol toward Wassili, and backed out of the room through the open door into his own room.

Peter put Katerin upon her feet, just as Wassili moved after him — and Peter beckoned the *moujik* on.

“And what may this be about?” demanded Katerin, staring at Peter as though she suspected that he was bereft of his senses.

“A marriage by abduction — the old folk custom of

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our people," declared Peter grimly. "Wassili! You bear witness! I have taken Katerin Stephanovna Kirsakoff from her house to mine — and there must be a witness. She is now my wife — and she must do as I say. So put away the knife — you cannot take from me the woman I have stolen!"

Katerin burst out in laughter.

"You Peter Petrovitch!" she exclaimed. "I thought you were an American — and yet you are Russian — stealing a wife by the old custom! Do you think I am to take this seriously?"

"You will find it is serious — till you are safe in Vladivostok," retorted Peter. "Then — well, once you are safe, you may do as you wish. But I am master till then."

She laughed again.

"So you are American after all — in Vladivostok I may do as I wish! How can you call yourself Russian? Go away, Wassili — it is but a joke!"

Wassili, not quite sure it was such a joke, put away his knife, and went back to the far room. Katerin shut the door, and then turned to Peter, who stood looking at her, resenting a trifle her taking it as a joke at all.

"We shall go aboard the car at once," he said. "Get ready your baggage, please."

"Ah, he is Russian again!" laughed Katerin.

"What does it matter if I am Russian or not?" said Peter. "When I try to consider your feelings, you insult ——"

"No, no, Peter," she begged, and went to him and put her hands gently on his sleeves, looking up into his face. "You did not understand — you know nothing of a woman's heart — I told you once that I loved you ——"

"Yes!" cried Peter. "You told me that, and then

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you insist upon staying here when I want to protect you — when you know there is a chance to go ——”

“Growl — growl like a Russian bear, Peter! But did you not come to say good-by?”

“To take you with me if I could.” He seized her hands. “O, Katerin, think this over and see what I want you to see — when you get to Vladivostok ——”

“And what when I get to Vladivostok? What am I to do when I get to Vladivostok?”

“Well, you will know what you want to do, then?”

“Do about what?”

“I want you to marry me — to go to America — to ——”

She stamped her foot.

“You are a hopeless American!” she cried. “I like you better as a Russian, Peter Petrovitch!” She dropped her head, and as he gave a cry of joy, she looked up, her face radiant with joy and flushed with color.

“Katerin! You will marry me?”

“How can I help myself — I have been stolen by the old law, and now ——”

“Yes, what?”

“I know that you want me — not for a promise — but for myself — Peter ——”

“O God!” he cried, “I know now I am forgiven!” and he crushed her to him.

Presently there came a knocking at the door of Katerin’s room, and the old serving woman came when Katerin called to her to enter.

“Tell Wassili to pack my baggage,” said Katerin. “We are all going to Vladivostok — at once.”

“But let Wassili first go for a priest,” said Peter. “And do not cry, my love — we shall both say farewell forever to the Valley of Despair, and our journey’s end shall be America — our America.”

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“America!” she whispered, looking through the window as if her eyes saw behind the fog-banks a strange land. “What a wonderful country America must be!”

“You cannot know till you have seen,” said Peter.

“I know now,” she replied, smiling through her tears, “I know now, Peter Petrovitch.”

“How can you know, my love?”

“Because — I know a Russian who became an American — the son of a bootmaker — a bootmaker who was an unfortunate — a poor boy ——”

“Hush, hush!” he said, and put his arms about her again, seeing where her thoughts were straying — to the fresh brown mound on the bleak hillside by the ruin of the old prison. “They are together, your father and mine. Because of that, we shall not forget our Holy Russia. Would not they both be happy — are they not both happy, knowing what they must know now, and seeing what the dead must see? We living think we would do one thing, but is it not that the dead guide us, knowing better than we what is before us and what we shall do before we have finished? Truly, as the wise say, from evil good — my love was here but I did not know it — and now I have found her.”

And as the fog shrouded them from the street, there was nothing to prevent him from kissing her once more.

(1)

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